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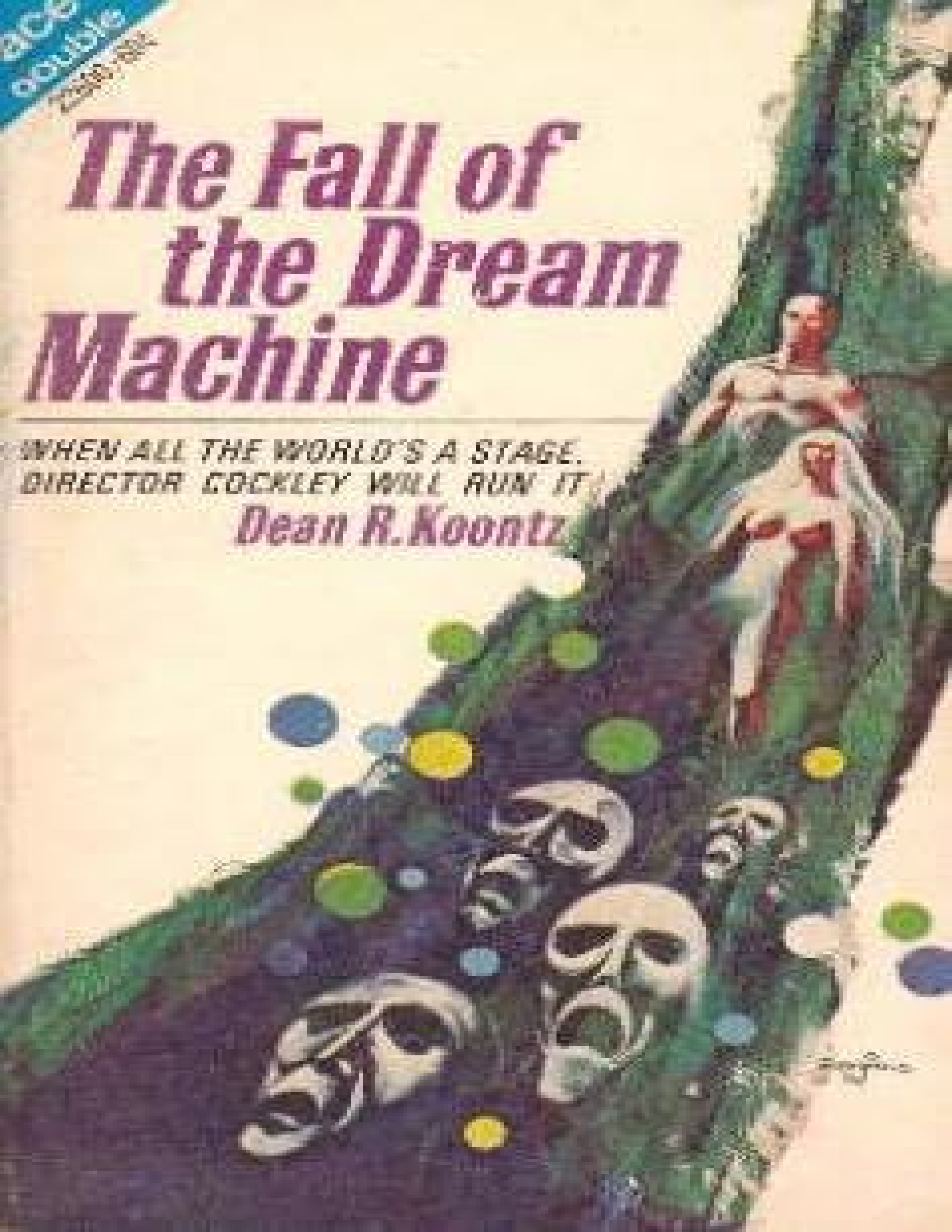
The Fall of the Dream Machine

WHEN ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE,
DIRECTOR COCKLEY WILL RUN IT

Dean R. Koontz



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The Fall of the Dream Machine

Dean Koontz

PART ONE:

STAGINGS FOR A REVOLUTION

Chapter One

The world is spinning on an axis two degrees different than it was a moment ago….

Her/your hair is tangled over his/your face, losing him/you in a honey world of softness, a hay world of smells. Her/your hands are upon him/you, massaging flesh of shoulders, neck, and thigh, playing delicate symphonies on his/your body.

LISA THE LOVELY: *Her/your eyes are blue; her/your lips are warm and red. There* is *a sun going nova in her/your flesh*.

MIKE THE MANLY: *He/you is strong; he/you is gentle. There is a sun going nova in his/your flesh too*…

LISA THE LUSTY: *Tigress, clawed and clutching*…

MIKE THE MUSKY: *Id desires personified and magnified* . . .

Thunders roar and lightnings flash and it rains stones.

Now there is a relaxing wherein they/you hold hands and say sweet things and occasionally raise onto elbows for brief moments to kiss and be kissed, to laugh and smile and sigh. The shadow-filled bedroom is a womb: the walls are dark and reassuring, the mattress almost a belly in the way it enfolds them/you. It is the Time After. And though it is not as exhilarating as the Time During, it is less frustrating than the Time Before. Everyone waits for all of Show for the Time During. Sometimes it comes in the afternoon and in strange places. But most often, as now, it is the late evening. And waiting until evening is a long, long time to wait.

Especially if you are a pale worm that experiences only through Show. Especially then.

***

"Great show, Mike," Limey said, spitting the words around the edges of the cigar clamped tightly between his teeth. "Especially some of those Time After comments to Lisa. Inspired! Damn, you'd think you really loved her!"

Mike Jorgova straightened his tie and slipped the ends of the magnetic tack behind shirt and in front of tie. There was no real sense in answering Limey, for no one listened to a Performer anyway. Besides, his ability in Show was not worth commenting on, for he would not be a star much longer. He did not wish to discuss that which was about to become past history, a part of his life worthy of forgetfulness. If things worked out right in the next few hours, today's show had been his last.

"Tomorrow we have you two doing it in a bath house on a crowded beach," Limey said. "That was my idea."

Mike controlled his rising anger—and rising gorge. "Isn't that just a bit too much? I mean, what with all those people about."

Limey did not catch the sarcasm. Limey caught very little beyond the exact dictionary definition of a word. Inferences and inflections were too far above him. "No. Not too much, Mike. That's the point. You'll be frightened of all those people and the possibility they may discover you. That will be something different—fear and sex."

"Perhaps I'll be too afraid to—"

"Now you know that isn't possible, Mike. You'll be able."

And he knew he would. There were drugs that would make him able even in the middle of an elephant stampede. He would be very competent, very able indeed. If he was there. And if all plans worked and the gods smiled favorably, he would not be there ever again.

He slipped into his greatcoat, the prototype of the model that was currently so popular with the viewing public. He wondered, briefly, how much Show got in royalties from the manufacturer of the Jorgova Greatcoat.

"Fredrick!" Limey called out in his gravelly voice. The door to the small dressing room opened and the bodyguard came in. "Mr. Jorgova will be going home," Limey said. "See that he arrives there safely."

"Yes sir," Fredrick said. His bulging muscles seemed to ripple, visible even under all those layers of clothes. The vibra-pistol was an ugly lump on his breast, cancerous.

"Tomorrow, Mike," Limey said, stepping into the hall and disappearing around a rack of sequined costumes.

Mike resisted an urge to speak comradely with Fredrick. It was Fredrick who would help him escape, and the excitement of the fast approaching break stirred his tongue. As if anticipating Jorgova's thoughts, the bodyguard pointed to the four corners of the room where the beetle-like bodies of microphones dotted the crevices. Mike pulled his gloves on, smiling. He could wait to talk. Actually, he had only spoken with Fredrick twice before. The first time had been two weeks earlier. They had left the studios, were crossing the macadamed parking lot. When the big man had begun to speak in whispered tones, Mike had thought that it was because he was a new bodyguard and did not understand that security forbade him to speak to his charge. Then the words had begun to seep into his ears: "I'm with the Revolution. We want to free you. Will you cooperate? Think about it and answer me tomorrow night when we cross the lot; there are microphones everywhere else." The second time, Mike had done the talking: "Help me."

He could have answered the first night. There was absolutely no need to think anything over. It was not fun to share one's life with

the rest of the world. There were seven hundred million subscribers to Show. Seven hundred million people watched over his shoulder, felt what he felt, knew what he knew (or most of what he knew, anyway), were what he was. All those goddamned people wherever he went, doing his thing with him. It wasn't even funny to speculate that Lisa had made love to three hundred or so million men tonight—and not just to him. It was not really humorous in the least.

"Let's go," Fredrick said, walking briskly to the door.

"Yes, let's," he answered, following and going through the portal the other held out of his way.

He had had a bodyguard now for four weeks—ever since the Revolutionists had freed Tom Storm, the star of the second shift. A new boy had to be moved in to take Storm's place, a sixteen year old with little experience, hardly in command of his emotions.

They passed the racks of clothes, the old props gathering dust, the card tables where stage helpers got a few minutes of relaxation and lost most of their weekly pay. They came, eventually, to the set for the first portion of the second shift show. The new boy, Ben Banner, sat with the ridiculously older Ellen Heart at a dimly lighted table in an out-of-the-way cafe, his hand on her knee—kneading it instead of caressing it. Mike would not have paused to watch, except for the Fade Out. Ellen began to grow hazy. A gray-black film glowed over and immediately around her. She was a ghost person for a brief moment—there and not there, real and unreal. Then, just as quickly as it had begun, it ended. All the technicians were on their feet, running, listening to the dials tell them what the delicate instruments recorded. The dials were not really dials, for they spoke, they did not show. But they were still called dials. No one knew why. There were a number of shrugged shoulders but no I've-got-it! expressions.

Fredrick pressed on his shoulder to remind him that they had a time schedule to meet if they were to bring off his escape. He

continued walking, turning into the main corridor that led to the large simu-wood doors at the end of the blue-tiled tunnel. Fade Outs were a relatively recent development, he mused as he walked. They had begun two months before when the toto-experience relays had been inserted to replace the ninety percent relays that had been in use. There were now half a dozen Fade Outs a week, at a minimum. Each time, the Performer appeared to get fuzzy, frayed at the edges, a smokeman. One moment there was a real actor, the next there was a phantom—like (reportedly) the image on an ancient television screen during a thunderstorm. The Performer did not remember those seconds of Fade Out at all. His mind was a blank except for what seemed to be snatches of talking that had not been spoken on the stage or anywhere in the studio. Aside from that—the partially heard babble of voices—there was nothing. It was an eerie blank. He knew. He had Faded Out twice.

The door opened automatically at their approach, and they stepped out into the cold wind that spit bits of snow and ice at them, stinging their faces. Far above, a yellow moon glowed briefly between clouds, was gone into darkness. Jorgova stepped into the back of his limousine floater, slid to the end of the seat to give Fredrick room, and reminded himself that the car was bugged just as the dressing room had been. Just as his bedroom, living room, kitchen, bathroom were.

The driver, an anemic slug of a man in a blue and yellow Show uniform, pulled from the parking lot onto the broad expanse of the superway, catching the eastbound auto-guide and flipping the controls to robo. They fluttered along in silence, flakes of snow cracking against the glass like soft bullets, some louder than others as the temperature neared the underside of the freezing mark, coming from zero. Sleet. The orange-topped guard rails flicked past, tiny sentinels, each with a bright phosphorescent cap, always at attention.

At the first exit, the chauffeur flipped off the robo, pulled the floater off the guide beam, and descended the twisting ramp. At the very bottom, Mike braced himself, following Fredrick's example. In a moment, he saw why they had braced. A light pickup rammed the nose of their own vehicle and tumbled both craft into an open drainage ditch full of mud and slush that slopped over the windows, then fell back into smaller waves that lapped at the doors.

Fredrick reached across the back of the front seat, brought the barrel of his vibra-pistol down solidly on the skull of the driver. The man slumped sideways onto the seat, too meek to offer even a moan. "C'mon," Fredrick said.

A third vehicle, a nondescript Champion, dull gray, pulled up beside them. The doors swung open; they climbed in. "Welcome to freedom," the driver called over his shoulder. He was a red-faced man with a great number of freckles, and broad, white teeth.

Freedom. But they had not gone a hundred yards before the helicopter flitted down over the trees, beating its dragon wings fiercely, focusing its luminous eyes on them, washing them with almost liquid brilliance.

Fredrick opened his door, placed the gun on the top of it and sighted on the aircraft. A thin, green pencil beam, almost invisible, flowed from his weapon, ended in a puff of blue-white smoke, blinding the dragon in one eye. An answering beam smashed the glass out of the wrap-around rear window. Fredrick fired again, hit again. But the gunman in the helicopter returned the fire, catching Fredrick squarely on the temple and ripping his skull apart like a muskmelon.

"Close the door!" the driver shouted.

But Mike found he was paralyzed. He could not force his fingers to move, let alone his arms. His body was locked in a fear grip, and the fingernails of that imaginary hand were biting into him, hurting.

He could not move, merely look. The headless corpse lay across the seat, blood gushing from torn veins. Fredrick was dead. And Fredrick had been the only one of these people he knew even remotely. And he had spoken to Fredrick only twice in his life! Suddenly it all seemed rather wild, rather improbable. He was running away from something he knew into something he could never conceive of. He had never been free. He had, from birth, been raised and groomed for Show. He had been taught how to sharpen his emotions for transmission. He had been taught complete control of his sensitivities. He had been, shortly, spoon fed. Death had been only a rumor. Here it was a reality; and from the driver's lack of shock, it seemed to be a common reality. He wanted to leap from the car, but his legs denied him.

The driver cursed, shoved the corpse from the seat, then turned back to the wheel. He slammed down on the accelerator, pulled onto the adjoining secondary road that branched away from streetlights and into darkness. The helicopter, though it now had no spotlights, was following. The pounding of its rotors shook the roof, made the floater bobble up and down on its own air cushion. The driver cut the headlamps, swerved into another side road that veered off toward a dense forest. Still, the helicopter was there.

A fountain of flames sprang up in front of them. Purple and cinnabar. *Pretty*, Jorgova thought and was immediately shocked that he could think of anything beautiful so soon after the corpse without a head had spewed blood over him.

… On his face…

He wiped the wet droplets from his cheeks and looked at them, his hands moving freely now. He had not noticed the dampness until this moment when he felt something trickle toward his chin. Fredrick's blood was all over his face. There was a sticky pool of it on the floor. Gray-white brain matter and chunks of hair-matted

bone stuck to his coat and trousers. He was, very suddenly, sick on the floor.

When he could manage to look up again, he could see flames bursting nearer and nearer the car. The tunnel of the forest loomed ahead. If the helicopter pilot realized what they were speeding toward, the shots would no longer just be warnings. He was not particularly frightened by that thought. He was not scared of Death so much as Uncertainty. Death would be better than going through all of this to face something and someone he had never been raised to cope with. *That* was frightening. That was terrifying!

The flames struck the hood, washed over the windscreen, roared across the roof.

The floater slipped off the smooth path of the road, bobbled across the drainage ditch and a number of boulders, coming within an inch or so of a few of them, then swung back onto the road again —successfully avoiding the fire. That time. The second time the flames struck, they bit at the roof. It was so violent a burst that the interior padding caught fire from contact with the metal roof. Mike began pounding at it with his hand, burned himself.

"Your coat!" the freckled driver shouted.

He struggled out of the bulky garment, wrapped it about his arm, began thumping it against the ceiling. There was a great deal of smoke. The fire, however, seemed to be smothered. He kept thumping to be certain.

The forest was close.

The trees looked like beneficent gods to him.

Flames coughed over the trunk. A full blast struck them broadside, fused the control wires of the underslung air system, and sent the car rolling into the cavernous maw of the trees that

swallowed the road. They were not so much as a leaf in October wind, spinning, tumbling, tossing. There was a clanging of things falling loose and rattling across the road into darkness. There was the squeal and crunch of metal collapsing beneath its own weight.

Mike clutched the rear of the front seat, tried to remember to keep his body limp so that the crashes would damage him as little as possible. When the floater finally came to a halt, lying on its roof under a canopy of pine boughs, he was uninjured, save for a few bruises. His largest problem was the thick splotches of blood and upchuck on his clothes. He shucked off his sport jacket, trying to rid himself of the overwhelming stench.

Someone was at the door. He prepared himself for Limey's face, Limey's cigar glowing insanely in the cool, dark air. But it was not Limey. It was not even anyone in Show uniform. "You okay in there, you three?"

There was a grunt from the direction of the front seat. The freckled face appeared, strained in something that might have been pain, might have been fear, might have been both. "Fredrick was killed back at the underpass. I think my arm is broken."

"You?" the stranger said, turning to Mike.

"Okay. I think."

"Well, let's get out of here. They're landing that damn whirligig now."

Mike stepped through the door, helped the new stranger wrench the dented front door open and extract the driver. The man's arm was definitely broken. Bone jutted through in one place, sharp and white and bloody.

They ran to a larger limousine waiting with its lights out a few hundred feet down the lane. Just as they climbed in, a vibra-beam

tore at the earth in front of the car, set the ground steaming. To Mike's surprise, the driver turned the floater to face the Show guards instead of running. The beams crackled against the windscreen, glanced off the hood and fenders without doing damage.

"Vibra-proof," the new stranger said, smiling.

"And expensive," Jorgova added.

The blades of the air system stuttered, and the car jolted for a moment as one of the guards went under. The other Show man jumped to the side of the road, kept firing. The chauffeur swung the car around, veered toward the man. He was an excellent driver. His hands worked as smoothly as a concert violinist's, plucking and drawing at the wheel. The limousine clipped the remaining guard with its front bumper, sent him in a death plunge over a hundred foot drop onto spiked rocks.

"We're behind schedule," the newcomer said. "Let's move."

The chauffeur accelerated. Trees flashed by, gray shadows against the darker shadows of the night.

Immediate danger behind, Mike began to think, once again, of his situation, his apartness. He turned to the man who seemed to be in charge. "What is expected of me?"

"What?" the other asked, looking at him, more than curiosity clouding his dark eyes.

"What do I do to earn this freedom?"

"Nothing," the other man said. "We have freed you because—"

Mike forced self-assurance into his voice and into his own heart. "Don't give me any propaganda line. You are leading some sort of

revolution against Show. It's supposed to be taboo, but the stories float through the studios, fast and thick. What do you want of me?"

The stranger remained silent a moment, then sighed. "There is no sense leading you in slowly. And I don't blame you for being determined to know where you stand. You will be behind a desk throughout the Revolution—when it comes. You will never go back into Show again. Other men will do that."

He felt as if he were being shoved along, carried with the tide instead of riding atop it. "I want to be in the front lines," he snapped. He did not want to be in the front lines, really, but he had to gain some control over what was happening to him or he'd be nothing more than he had been in Show—a puppet, a tool.

"That's impossible! We need you too much to risk—"

"Either I work in the front lines or I get out here," he said, taking hold of the door handle.

They stared at each other, one trying to outlast the other. There was no sound but the purring of the air system, the *whoof* of an occasional gust of air sweeping across the car.

The chauffeur and the man with the broken arm were listening, waiting.

"You really mean it," the other man said at last.

"You're damn right I do."

More silence. At length: "All right. You win." He turned to the chauffeur. "Blake, take us to Dr. McGivey's instead."

"Then I'm on the front lines?"

"Exactly."

It had not been heroism or anything remotely like it that had driven him to demand to be in the thick of action. He had been sinking again into a swamp where the currents twisted him without any regard to where he wished to go. Had they demanded he fight, he would have demanded a desk job. He felt as if he were guiding his fate now. And he felt, very slightly, better. "What will I do, specifically?"

The stranger offered his hand, shook. "First, I am Andrew Flaxen. I'm some sort of officer in this whole thing; I'm not sure what exactly." They stopped shaking. "Your mission, since you demand action, will be to rescue Lisa Monvasa from Show."

The night rushed past like coal dust.

Chapter Two

She undressed without turning the lights on. She suspected them of having planted cameras recently.

She made a game of seeing things in the shadows: a dog's head, ears flattened in rage, teeth gritted; a matronly woman bending over a loaf of homemade bread, sticking— what?— toothpicks into the product; a spider…

Something else…

But she could not see herself.

She crawled onto the humming Lull Cushion of the bed and listened to the notes that slithered over its million fibers, abandoned herself to the massaging tingle of its babel tongues…

She was tired.

She thought about Mike and about Show. And, in the pit of her mind, somewhere deep down, they were two different things.

She fell asleep.

Chapter Three

Anaxemander Cockley was not a man to be sneered at. He controlled, figuratively and literally, seven hundred million people. He owned Show. It had been his from the start —his invention, his crusade, his success. He had first conceived of it while in his twenties. But no one would back him then; all the financiers so stuck on the idea of traditional television that they could not see beyond their red noses. Wherever he went, he was rebuked. There were no investors for "crackpot schemes."

That had been two hundred years ago. Not only had he made a success of Show and lived to gloat about it, but his vast sums of money enabled him to set up the most complete, most detailed set of computer surgeons in the world. He was able to buy from the UN organ bank to replace whatever wore out. Then he began building his own organ bank and forgot the UN; he was completely self-contained. He had lived to gloat—and had been gloating for two hundred years.

His early years pointed to his later success. He had, when young, dedicated his life to making money. He had several good character traits to help him along; imagination, ruthlessness, greed, and a will of purest iron. When his father died, leaving him in charge of the small electronics firm that had produced conservative things for conservative businesses, it was Anaxemander who turned the plant into a laboratory. Risking all the profits and holdings, it was Cockley Electronics that turned out the first workable robot—a robosweep that could sweep any floor, sliding its compact body under the lowest obstacles that would force a housewife to get down on her pretty hands and knees. Realizing that the greatest area open to ideas was the undeveloped field of housework and home repair

machines, Cockley next produced the robomower which sped across the grass (pre-programmed for that individual lawn in the expensive models and simply radio-controlled in the cheaper make) snipping away without aid. The company moved from a low six figure company to one of the top hundred in three years. In five years, it was grossing thirty-nine million dollars per quarter—thanks to the robopainter and the roboironer.

The robopainter was, perhaps, the most complex machine devised by Cockley Electronics. It was a spider-like apparatus that wielded four rollers for interior work and a roller and three brushes for exterior painting. Each leg was capped with a suction cup that allowed it to climb easily where a man would be in danger. In fact, the original promotion gimmick was the machine's climbing up the bald face of Racatacha Peak, that sheer and featureless cliff recognized as the tallest on the moon.

The money had come. Eventually, he handed over the production of all the robomechs to Ford, GM, and General Electric. Then the big boom came with the mass production. He received monthly royalty checks in the hundreds of thousands. With his money, he devoted himself to the building of the Cockley Laboratories for Mind Studies. It was this institution and its hundreds of workers who crystallized Show into a reality.

It took eleven years from the birth of the idea to its perfection.

He would never forget that night in 1991 when the fifty reporters, by special invitation, had set themselves warily into the mind-sharing chairs and flicked on—warily again —the mind-sharing auras, and had felt just what it was like for Algernon Fowler to stick his head in a lion's mouth. They experienced his fear, his arrogance, his sexual stimulation. They also sat entranced as the acrobats left their perches and glided through empty air to waiting hands; and most spectacularly—and, Cockley thought, most luckily—they had even experienced death when that lovely young girl (what had her

name been? Elen Petrovotch? Petrovitch?) had missed the hands and crashed a hundred and two feet to the arena floor. That night—at the age of forty—he had changed the world for the second time. The robomechs had started a new trend in society's evolution. But Show was a *revolution*.

Old art forms died. This was art carried to its logical end: the actual sharing of another man's perceptions. There were no more books or movies; they were not legislated against, but merely became passe and undesirable in light of the modern advances in entertainment. Television was obsolete overnight, though it managed to hang on a few more years. With shared love and shared sex, there was less and less need for the real thing. Population declined, taking with it all fears of an overpopulated world—except in a few backward countries where Show had not yet reached. It was a revolution not altogether bloodless, a revolution of media.

Now, a hundred and ninety years later, there were over half a billion Show subscribers sitting in homes all over the world, linked to the brains of the Performers. The business (at three hundred a year per subscription) gleaned nearly two hundred and twenty-five billion a year, counting the sales of its own products, which it advertised incessantly in subliminal commercials the audience did not even realize it was seeing. It was no longer a business; it was a world power. And Cockley had never relinquished control. It was no longer the money he was after.

It was the power. And someone was trying to sabotage the very basis of his power structure.

Anyone's basic emotions could be transmitted, but the audience had come to expect higher degrees of excellence than they got from the casual actor or "extra." Performers were chosen almost from birth for their sensitive natures, their fine emotional edges. Their parents were paid well, and their life then consisted of training and more: sharpening their abilities to transmit their feelings, vitalizing

their emotions so the pickup cones could get clear, good material. There were very few people naturally able to be Performers, and not all of the ones who entered training made it through. When the Revolutionists stole the Performers, they took away the foundation of Show.

Without Jorgova, he could not use Lisa. The next oldest Performer was a fifteen year old boy, an out-of-the-question match for Lisa. He would have to team the youngster with that thirteen year old girl and only use Lisa for extra sequences. And Lisa was so damned good!

Anaxemander Cockley drummed his fingers on the real wood top of his desk and mulled over a mental list of suspects. He had many enemies, he knew. Topmost in his mind was the President of the United States. The government had fought Show openly and covertly for years, until it saw it could not win. As the decades passed, Show vice-presidents had more or less taken over the Government, worming their way into Congress with Show support.

Most people in this country (and now the world) experienced a great deal of life through Mike, Lisa, and Show. There had been other stars through the years, but the latest two had been the best team yet. The birthrate was way down, for there were few husbands with wives as attractive as the big-busted, sleek-bodied women Performers— and even fewer with wives who were as willing and cooperative. There were fewer and fewer young people. The Government lost the faction of the populace that had always been the easiest to propagandize, to fill with visions. The older people grew complacent, obtained something like happiness. Yet the President still agitated, still looked for a means of bringing back the glorious days of his power.

Second on the list was the UN Secretary General, who had fought against Show's international trend, thus attempting to stop Cockley's rise to power. But since Show was then a private

enterprise, the Secretary had been unable to do a thing. Except, perhaps, steal Performers.

Cockley decided that the Secretary's office would soon have to fall into his hands. The Presidency too. It was foolish to allow even these near powerless positions to be manned by civilians. Past history showed that a conspiracy could grow unnoticed in a bureaucracy the size of Show. Witness the Kennedy assassination, he thought. The man would have to be removed next election. No. No, he would have to be removed sooner…

The message light on his desk flashed, and a yellow card popped out of the delivery slot like a lightly browned piece of toast. He slipped it into the player, leaned back to listen.

"Health report: A. Limey," the rasping machine-voice said. '"Good condition in general—save congestion of the lungs. Pancreas in excellent condition/kidney good condition/bladder fair to good condition/testicles good to excellent."

He fed the card into the shredder just as the door buzzer rang.

"Come in."

The door opened and Limey stepped through, his false smile tinted slightly with fear. Cockley noted that, and it made him happy. Fear. He wanted to have them scared to death of the old man. It kept them in place. "You wanted to see me?" Limey asked.

"Close the door."

Limey did.

"Sit down."

Limey did this thing too.

"You shouldn't smoke those filthy cigars," Cockley said, eyeing the smoldering stump clamped tightly between the other man's yellow-stained fingers. "Your health record says your lungs are filled with scar tissue."

Limey put the stub out in an ashtray provided for the relatively few visitors to the executive suite. "I guess this is about Jorgova?"

"How did it happen, Limey? You told me security was flawless. You told me there would not be another escape."

"Well—"

"You realize, I hope, that training Performers to reach the standards viewers have come to expect is not an easy or inexpensive task."

"I think I understand the trouble and money involved, Mr. Cockley," the little man said, shifting uneasily.

Cockley stood and began pacing around the blue carpeting. "No, I doubt you understand them at all. At first the viewers were satisfied with just different things: mountain climbing, alligator wrestling, auto racing. But in time the novelty wore off. Then Show developed the ninety percent relays to replace the eighty percent ones. But even more was needed. We decided to train our actors. The Government passed the Show Conscription Act. Since the Government was composed mostly of Show people, the bill met little opposition in either house. And the public raised no outcry, for a majority of the public was living mainly through Show. The President *had* to sign it. So we draft (and pay the parents handsomely) five thousand babies a year and train them. We would draft more if we could find them. But only two or three a year manage to make it through the final stages of the training, the discipline. And even fewer manage to withstand the probing of seven hundred million minds when they perform. The recent toto-experience relays make it

even harder on them. Jorgova is a rare item, a natural-born Performer. I don't think you understand one little bit, Mr. Limey."

Limey's eyes grew wide, like dishes, as Cockley turned to face him. The older man's thumbs were no longer merely thumbs. They were weapons. Thin blades extended an inch and a half from the blunt edge of both nails. They glinted in the light.

They sparkled.

"You're not—"

"We must have employees who understand, Mr. Limey. We can't have men who allow the opposition to place a bodyguard in our midst, a Revolutionary next to our star actor."

Limey stood, circled the chair, putting it between them. The door seemed an eternity away. Cockley seemed as close as his next breath… if he were to have a next breath.

"The door's locked," Cockley said. "And the room is soundproofed."

Limey grabbed and heaved the chair.

Cockley ducked, surprisingly fast for an old man.

And his leap was even faster. There was a flash of silver, a spattering of red. There was a thumping of a body on the carpet, a gurgled scream never completed.

Cockley returned to the desk, buzzed for servants. The door opened and two men with blank, emotionless faces entered. "Take him to Dr. Odegarde," Cockley said. "He knows what organs to extract for the supply tanks."

When they had gone with their silent burden, he sat down at the desk and began to review his mental list of enemies. The blades were back in his thumbs again. His mind flittered from one possibility to another. His mind was awfully fast for an old man's mind. But then, he was not an old man. And he would never be one. Never…

Chapter Four

Mike had no idea where he was. They had blindfolded him, hustled him into yet another car, and sped for parts unknown. The only thing that had been pronounced about the trip was a hobbling sensation, a heaviness, as if the car had dipped into water. Indeed, the whirring of the air system had seemed to cease—rather to become another sort of whirring, much duller and much baser. There had been a second similar sensation—this time a coming out of water. When they took the blindfold off, he was in a white-walled room, stark and empty. They had led him to the lounge, living room, auditorium or whatever it was, leaving him alone with instructions to wait for Dr. McGivey. He was waiting.

The room was beautiful. Whoever Dr. McGivey was, he had taste—and considerable sums of money. A fountain splashed in the middle of the floor, burbling over a shelf of volcanic rock that towered nearly to the ceiling. Green dots of plant life were sprinkled liberally in the crevices of the stone, an occasional orange flower mixed with them. The floor was also volcanic rock, with every other block polished in a way to contrast the rough and the smooth almost as the squares on a checkerboard. Pieces of low-slung furniture—mostly comfortable couches and chairs—were strewn about in a manner that made them blend in with the carefully created shadows, leaving the better lighted areas for statuary and paintings.

"Mr. Jorgova," a voice said, steady and deep.

He turned to see a white-smocked gentleman at the sliding door. He stood. "Dr. McGivey?"

"Yes. Arthur McGivey. First name, please."

Arthur McGivey was a broad-shouldered six-footer with gray hair and eyes to match, cool, detached, almost emotionless. Mike thought of him as a very efficient man. But his step was light and quick, and something like amusement sparkled behind the eyes. They shook hands.

"What am I to do here?" he asked. He still had fear for his life. The unknown world ahead was still perhaps a bit darker than the slavery he had left behind. But he was going back for Lisa. The thought cheered him more than he thought it should. He remembered something Limey had said: "You'd think you really loved her!"

"Follow me," McGivey said. "Showing is better than telling."

He walked behind the big man, down the hall, into an elevator. They dropped like a stone, landed like a feather.

"This is an underground installation, isn't it?"

"Yes," McGivey said as the doors slid open. "But how did you know?"

"You're operating against Show, which is tantamount to working against the Government itself. You wouldn't be holding your offices in a skyscraper, yet we dropped a great number of stories. That leaves only one possibility."

"Very good. Andrew told me you were bright, sensitive."

Mike looked for sarcasm on the man's face, but he found none. The remark had been sincere.

They stepped from the elevator into a room filled with machines.

Machines of blue steel, cold…

Machines of brass…

Machines clinging to the ceiling like flies…

Machines crouched on the floor and next to the walls like roaches ready to flee…

"Well spend a great deal of time in this room, Mr. Jorgova."

"Mike," he corrected, remembering McGivey's similar kindness of a few minutes before.

"Okay, Mike. Well spend a great deal of time here—changing your identity."

Somehow, he did not like the phrase. He stiffened.

"Oh," the doctor hastened to reassure, "not your personality or your concept of yourself. That won't be touched. But other things. Your retina pattern, the exact composition of your blood. Other things. When you leave here, all police files on you will be useless. You will be able to walk by a hundred robo-detects without activating any of them."

Mike felt his muscles relaxing. Here it was, assurance that he *would* return to the real world. They *would* be sending him after Lisa. They would not be spending all this time and money on him if he were only being stuck behind a desk somewhere. His life was in his own hands; his life was his own for the first time. A few changes, a few erasures, a few new etchings on his body, and he would be the sole master of himself and what he did. And the knowledge was frightening.

***

The axe blade smashed through the door, withdrew, smashed again. There was shouting outside: firemen ordering other firemen

about, police hollering at a curious crowd, a man—hysterical.

The door gave, toppled inward.

They dashed through the darkened entrance foyer, into the shadow-fitted living room where shades of night hid everything.

The couch stood in blackness. The new-mod striped chair was a sleeping zebra. The civilian, the hysterical one, led the others to the winding stairway and upward.

They found her in the bedroom, sitting under the aura. Her eyes were two gray and motionless circles slashed out of a storm sky and pasted to her withered face.

"My sweet God!" the man cried, grabbing her hands, dropping them instantly with distaste.

"How long?" one of the firemen asked. "I've been out of town on Show business for eight days. It was only last night that I noticed her answers to my questions over the phone were very limited in vocabulary—"

"Which indicated a robo-answerer," the fireman finished. They turned off the aura. Her eyes moved not at all. Her lips quivered, however. Gray, vacant eyes … They put her on a stretcher, covered her with a blanket, rushed her outside through the people and the snow to the waiting ambulance. He crawled in beside her. She looked sixty; she was thirty. A latent Empathist. An Empathist! If Show ever found out that his wife was an Empathist, he would be fired—even though it had been Show that made her what she was. In a way, it would be better if she died.

She was an Empathist. She had become so involved in the toto-experience of Show that she had lost touch with reality, become—almost—a Performer. A vegetable. A zombie.

The siren wailed.

Snow smashed onto the windscreen, was wiped off.

And she died before they could begin intravenous feeding…

***

There were a great many dark-skinned Mexicans in the white-walled room. It made Farmer nervous. Dark people always made his skin crawl. He wished he could go into the rec room and sit under the aura, but he had used up his four hours a day viewing time. Show employees were restricted in the use of the aura. He thought that was ridiculous. After all, he was working for Show! Yet the special privileges appealed to him, the position and the money. And if one did not work for Show, one did not work, for Show was the owner or controller of all industries and all businesses. The great majority sat in their homes, living on Dole (which was now a considerable sum per individual per year), functioning as the buyers of society, responding to the subliminals. There was not enough challenge in that for him. Even though there was the use of unrestricted aura in civilian life.

A tape-pellet spun out of the metal console before him, rolled down a gleaming aluminum tube into the player. The machine spoke to them. Every dark eye in the room faced the desk. "These have been found as acceptable draftees: Gonzales, Pedro; Hebiva, Alonzo; and Gonzales, Maria."

The metal voice clicked off.

"Will the proper parents step forward to receive their monies," he droned.

Six dark people came. The others, moaning and whispering, walked slowly, tiredly to the exit. They were poor people, unable to subscribe to Show. All Show meant to them was a fortune in return

for yet another unwanted child. And they had lost; their child was not good enough.

Most of them would take it out on their children, on the children that had lost them the fortune.

Leonard Farmer opened the center of his drawer and withdrew the money cards, slipping each into a player and letting it cry out its denomination: "Five!" and "Thousand!" and "Hundred!" He looked up at the dark faces. It was time to buy some babies…

Chapter Five

The next day was Tuesday.

Mike woke to the music that filtered in through unseen grids in the wall. At first it was soft, the gentler parts of *Scheherazade*.. Then it was the storm scene from the same piece. When he was completely awake, yawning his last yawns, *Bolero* swept in, pulling him along in its greater and greater pools of intensity. Finally, string music—undefined—sang beautifully in the background.

The entire room was constructed to cater to any demand —a mechanical genie whose storehouse was endless. He could get drinks, alcoholic and non-alcoholic, food of every description and some kinds it was best not to describe, music tapes, education tapes, the newstapes from all seven major news centers, even books, though he could not read them. Reading was a lost art. Everything spoke to the modem citizen, nothing merely showed. He punched for orange juice, a raw egg, and a serving of toast. When these things came, he broke the egg in the glass of juice, sipped the concoction between bites of crisp, browned bread.

The message grid went *ding-dong*. He activated it. "Yes?"

"Art here." McGivey's voice came through brittle and unreal. "We'll be starting work on your blood composition in an hour."

"I'll be there."

"Dial for a morning newstape," the doctor added. "Andrew Flaxen has been busy planting rumors everywhere."

When the newstape came, Jorgova stopped eating long enough to drop it into the player. "Show star missing?" the newstape asked dramatically. The story went on to say that rumors were spreading that a second Performer was kidnapped from Show. Anaxemander Cockley, the story said, was keeping mum on the whole affair. It was noted that a replacement had already been put into Mike's old spot. A young, half-trained boy, the tape lamented. It made note that Lisa Monvasa was not on either, but a younger girl was double-billed with the new boy. Evidently, the tape went on, this substitution was necessary because of the age difference between Lisa and the new leading man.

He shut off the tape, trembling a bit. Hr wondered just what Cockley would do to him if he ever caught him. And he was also terribly worried about what Cockley might do to Lisa if he suspected her of having knowledge of Mike's escape.

It was a natural thing to worry about Lisa. He had worried about her since they were children, through adolescence, and through years of Show. He had always, he now saw, loved her. And when he heard the story that came next on the tape, his worry grew stronger. A. Limey, chief Show officer, would be buried that afternoon, in a closed coffin ceremony…

"What we have to do," McGivey said, "is change a few of the chemical agglomerations in your blood, change your genes and the very marrow of your bones to insure that slightly different blood will be produced from now on, to be certain that your new blood index is permanent."

He was resigned to things like this. Though the machinery frightened him and the words the doctor spoke were unnerving, he had accepted the fact that he must undergo whatever they asked of him. His mind was busy trying to answer other questions now. "Why did Flaxen break the story of my escape?"

"He has been fighting Show for too long not to gloat on a success."

"But doesn't Cockley own the newstapes? I thought Show had the country in a vise grip."

"Cockley did try to take over the newstapes once, but it only resulted in the rise of little, underground tapes that challenged him more strongly than the giants had. He has found it easier to subsidize the seven major newstapes and let them tape a little that is unkind than to fight them and give rise to genuine anti-Show sentiment. You will notice the tone of the news story is such that Show seems the underdog, trampled upon by mysterious bullies. That tone is intentional."

"But why does Flaxen want to hurt Show? I'm still confused about the reason for this Revolution."

McGivey smiled. "Andrew is an aesthetic man. We all are, we Revolutionaries. Romanticists. Show offends his sensibilities, the world Show has created offends his sensibilities. He is against it just as people long ago were against television."

"But he can't win. No one did away with television."

"We have no television now," McGivey said smugly. He injected some pink liquid into Mike's arm. It stung for only a second.

"But Show replaced television—and Show is worse!"

"And Show can be replaced too, perhaps by something better this time."

He tried to think about that for a moment, but the drug pulled him down into blackness…

***

It was Tuesday morning.

It came to Lisa that if Mike could get away, so could she. If Mike could leave Cockley and all his detectives confounded, she could too. She had packed a small bag with the essential clothes, a few synthe-ham sandwiches that she had punched for that morning, and a knife she had retained from the dinner tray. The last was only heavy plastic, but it was sharp, and it was deadly.

Her only large window looked across the landscaped lawn that surrounded Cockley Towers. It was open now on the pretense of her liking fresh air and not the machine-cooled, machine-flavored, machine-scented stuff that seeped through the little metal wire mouths in the ceiling. There was a balcony on the apartment below hers; they did not trust balconies to everyone, and especially not to those who might run away. She could crawl out of the window, drop to the balcony below. From there, she could reach out to the branches of a large weeping willow—branches that were firm and steady. Then she would have the great city in which to lose herself. And perhaps in which to find Mike.

She was certain it would be easy.

She was dressed in stretch slacks, a tight and comfortable black sweater, and a dark brown suede jacket. Hefting the small bag of what she considered essentials, she drew the drapes completely away from the open window…

Chunk!

Eight thick bars of steel slammed out of the top of the window, embedded themselves in the bottom, sending cement chips and dust mushrooming up in an ugly little cloud. Somewhere in the hallway outside there was a soft *ding-ading-ading*. There were the footfalls of running men.

She suddenly wondered what she would do with all those ham sandwiches.

And she wept.

***

It was Tuesday afternoon.

"All the tips came from public phones," the small dark man who was Howard Connie, Show detective, said. He picked nervously at the goatee that dotted his chin, looked up at his boss, back down at his folded hands.

"That tells me absolutely nothing," Cockley snapped. "What about the dead helicopter guards?"

"Were still working on that. The helicopter lights were knocked out with a vibra-beam, standard model, untraceable. Fredrick's body yielded no clues. His past was carefully constructed to fool the computer. When the machine was set upon it without any duty but to discover its flaws, it canceled the thing out in four minutes. Maybe we should process position applications one at a time instead of by the thousands, a maximum check instead of a minimum. The guards were killed by a floater. It must have been vibra-negative."

"That should narrow it down," Cockley said, edging forward on his seat.

"It does. To thirty-six thousand, three hundred and twelve. There are that many vibra-negative cars around, counting this country only."

Cockley stood, leaned across the desk. "I want to narrow that list down. Code the names of the owners of those cars; use a computer. I want all the names of those who were obviously

somewhere else deleted from the list. Scratch the names of those whose cars were in garages for repairs or in storage."

Connie stood. "Yes, Mr. Cockley." He crossed to the door. "Oh, and it was a black floater. Some of the paint chips we found on the one corpse were black."

"Then rule out all but black floaters before you start," Cockley said, smelling a quick end to the search. "I want that car found in twenty-four hours!"

***

It was Tuesday evening.

President Roger Nimron looked through the stacks of info-tapes there. When he found what he wanted, he turned to go back to his easy chair and its player, but his eye was caught by the movement of the falling snow. He walked to the window. The White House lawn was covered by a calcimine blanket. The trees drooped—all those different trees from all over the world, subjected to Nature's most beautiful paint brush. Winter meant a lot of things to him. It was during the winter months that his wife had brought him a daughter. It was during the winter that the last President had died, leaving him in office.

The useless office; the antiquated office.

He stood considering the history of his position in relationship to its present importance and was somewhere up near Eisenhower when the thing struck the windows. He realized he had been vaguely aware of it as it had come spinning through the air above the lawn, ramming snow-flakes that got in its way, roughly the size of a football. But it had not drawn his attention, what with his mind wrapped in reverie and in watching the chiaroscuro patterns of snow against darkness. Then, *wuff*! it had struck the window very softly,

its suction cup legs tightening against the pane. It was a great ugly spider thing, belly swollen. A small extension slid from its underside and began burning an entrance in the window.

Nimron backed to his easy chair, his voice caught and lost somewhere in the bottom of his throat, unable to pass constricted muscles.

The spider machine gobbled a hole in the glass, stuck a leg through.

Another leg…

Then it was inside the glass and onto the wall. Its head swiveled, stopped when it caught him. A dart spun from its mouth instead of silky web matter. The dart buzzed slowly, seeking. He brought the chair pillow up just in time, used it as a shield.

The spider fired again.

Again, he blocked the dart.

And finally he was able to scream.

The door burst inward, admitting two Secret Service guards.

The spider went up in a puff of smoke. But not before it detonated itself, blasting out part of the wall and killing one of the guards who had ventured too close.

Snow drifted in through the charred plaster…

***

It was Tuesday night.

Mike was fed intravenously and put to bed, with his new blood.

Lisa undressed in the dark and stood by the window bars, looking at the snow, at the city…

Roger Nimron felt safer now. He and his family were three miles below the Appalachians in quarters that Anaxemander Cockley had never heard of.

Here and there, dotted in different towns and villages, thirty-nine Empathists were being discovered, being rushed to hospitals, recovering or dying. Mostly dying. Fifteen thousand Empathists a year now. But what are fifteen thousand to seven hundred million?

The snow was still falling. It was getting deep…

Chapter Six

"Well?" Cockley asked.

Howard Connie fingered the card-tape of figures, facts, and conclusion—all machine calculated, drawn, and imagined. There are only nine thousand, two hundred and two black floaters equipped with vibra-negative. One hundred and twelve of these were known to be in garages. Ninety-four were stored for vacationing owners. Seven thousand, three hundred and forty-one were too distant to have been involved in the kidnapping. One thousand, two hundred and fifty-four were sitting in used floater lots or junkyards. That leaves four hundred and one black, vibra-negative floaters to choose from.

"I want every one checked," Cockley said. "Look for missing scraps of paint, dents on air systems where bones might have struck, dried blood in the air system. You might have to steal some of them to examine them closely enough."

"We have a blanket search warrant that covers the nation."

"Don't use it. I want this done secretly. I don't want the rabbit running before we have him in our sights."

"Yes, Mr. Cockley." Connie exited, leaving the old man to himself.

Cockley turned to the player on his desk, flipped it on and settled down to review a problem that was defying solution. The words of the machine hummed past his ears. The president had disappeared. And the spider had not killed him. Somehow, Nimron had gotten away to some sordid little hole which even Show

detectives could not uncover. It was infuriating. He had tried to kill the man but had only succeeded in scaring him into hiding.

He flipped off the player and punched the button that brought him into direct contact with the main computer. "Latest information on the Nimron disappearance!" he said. "None," the computer answered. He flipped it off and slammed a fist into the desk. *Damn it*! Roger Nimron was a dangerous man. He was a romantic, collecting old books which he could not read, old movies which he could not view since there were no projectors. He should have known the man was not fit for the Presidency.

At least he had learned a lesson. There would never be a freely elected President again. It would be a Show man who won the office from now on. A man of his choosing. Perhaps Howard Connie. Connie was afraid of him. He liked that in a man: humility.

He looked at the wall clock, stood and set the office to lock behind him. They were waiting in surgery. Limey's genitals, they said, looked fine. He hoped so. He sincerely hoped so…

On Andrew Flaxen's estate, there was a garage.

In the garage, the car fast-dried its new coat of paint, twirling itself about in the blast of hot air from the ceiling vent. The old paint had been flushed down the drains along with the human hair, bone, and blood. The old air system was a gleaming piece of statuary, reformed. The car stood smooth, black, and innocent.

"Good," Flaxen said.

"I thought so too," his chief mechanic said proudly. "You'd never know she was a killer."

"A liquidator," Flaxen said, mouth wrinkled. "An exterminator."

"Precisely," the mechanic said, grinning.

"Park it outside tonight where they can get to it easily."

They both smiled.

The car gleamed.

Chapter Seven

He had new retina patterns and a new blood index. McGivey had even changed his perspiration odor. He would not have thought of that himself. After McGivey briefly explained the Silver Hounds that could track a man through a city sewer on smell alone, however, the wisdom of changing his body odor struck him as extremely prudent.

Indeed, the days with McGivey were days of change in every respect. Not only his physical self was altered, but his mental self, his attitudes, outlooks, and opinions were bending, twisting, reshaping. He was, for the first time, seeing the real world. Not the world of Show or the world Cockley's Performers lived in—one of guards, police, monitors, and the all-hearing, omnipresent microphones. The Real World. It frightened him to a degree. Cockley was slowly but very certainly taking over the control of that real world. And the idea did not appeal to Mike.

All the world a Show, the men and women merely Performers…

Mike had only met Anaxemander Cockley once. In his earlier years as a Performer, he had refused to do a certain private scene with Lisa, thinking of all those prying eyes, sharing bodies. He had been taken to the boss's office. He had planned a big speech, very dramatic, very dignified. But there had been very little talking, and Cockley had done most of that. The only time he had managed to speak a few words of protest, Cockley had leaped across his desk, dragged him to the floor, and began to throttle him. He had escaped. But he knew that Cockley had allowed him to escape. The man had terrible power in his hands, his arms. He had never demanded to see the boss again. The pain had not bothered him so much as the

knowledge that Cockley had enjoyed strangling him, beating him. Enjoyed it!

He did not like the idea of such a man coming so close to ruling so much of the world. Anything Flaxen and his group wanted him to do in return for his freedom was not too much.

"Anything?" McGivey asked.

"Anything."

The operating theater was cluttered with sparkling machines, machines with arms and hands and brains and eyes of their own.

"Well, that is a healthy and cooperative attitude," the doctor said, sitting down on the edge of a large table dotted with culture dishes capped by plastic lids. "Especially since I'm going to have to ask you to agree to something rather important."

Mike leaned forward, gripping the arms of his chair, tainting the air with his new odor, his new eyes glittering, new blood throbbing in his vessels. "What?"

"We have to change your face."

Mike felt his heart skip a beat, his temperature drop, rise, drop, rise again.

"Get hold of yourself. I know what you're going through. No one likes to lose his face. It is the strongest blow to the ego. And you have a stronger desire than most to keep your face, for you were a Performer."

"What does that have to do with it?" he snapped. There was an unreasoning fear burgeoning within him, a fear that his psyche would be next, that they would drain him of all that was once Jorgova and fill him with something strange… a cream puff flooded

with arsenic pudding. The depths of his mind rebelled against giving up his face. And he could not understand why.

"You have been taught—sleep-taught and wake-taught —from birth to protect your face while doing dangerous things. The audience does not want to identify with a deformed Performer. You were taught to use your face to evoke emotions in other Performers so that those emotions could be transmitted to the folks at home. You were taught to register disgust, hatred, love, sorrow, oh so many things with your face muscles. And all that training has rooted in your mind and will not easily let go."

"But why does it have to be changed?" He was suppressing the urge to run.

"The irrationality of that question should prove your fears are resting on shaky ground. It must be changed so that you can walk in the world again. There are seven hundred million people who have *been* that face."

He looked at the machines.

Some of the fingers held knives… that would dig into his face…

"You step outside of here with your real face, and you will be back in Cockley's circus again. And for good this time."

The blank eyes of the machines stared at him, waiting.

"And Cockley might decide that the people at home would like a little sado-masochistic entertainment. Like feeling your toenails being pulled out. Only the toenails will be *yours*."

"You don't have to get ugly," he said, forcing down a lump in his throat. "Do I get to pick my new face?"

McGivey smiled. "Good, and yes. I can make you anything you want. Dashing, plain, or ugly."

"Dashing, please."

"Egomaniac."

Jorgova smiled. "Butcher."

"The machines will do it all," McGivey said. "No room for human error. You don't have to worry about a sloppy nose or too thin lips."

"Could we get it over with, please?"

"Surely."

And then McGivey was all efficiency. He picked up the programming microphone and began giving the machines all sorts of technical instructions. Mike thought that it would have been easier if the doctor had done the surgery himself. But then machines do not sneeze when shaping a cheek…

"Lie down there," McGivey said, pointing to a cot that evidently slid into the wall where the dark wielders of blades rested. "All your clothes off."

"For a face job?"

"You'll be completely sterilized first. Clothing isn't as easy to sterilize as skin."

He followed instructions, lay down on the bed without legs.

"Feet stiff and straight," McGivey said.

He straightened them just as the needles plunged into the heels of his feet. All colors were overly bright for a moment, all sounds a tiny bit sharper, all smells of antiseptics more pungent.

And then there was darkness…

And then there was light…

He raised a hand to shield his eyes from the glare, and his fingers grazed the jelly bandage that encased his face. Bit by bit, things came back to him, fell into order. His face had been changed. First his blood, then his eyes, then his smell. Now his face. He fought the panic, surveyed the room.

It was the same room he had been in before the operation. The slope-backed chairs, psychedelic paintings, the velvet curtains were all the same. The curtains, he knew, hid a wall and not a window. As he moved his head to the left, he saw McGivey sitting in the recliner, his hands clasped behind his head. "Good morning," the doctor said.

He tried to move his mouth, found it too was covered with jelly. He reached quickly for his nose, discovered two tubes that broke through the bandage to get air for his lungs.

"I had to reshape the lips, replace your fine teeth with firmer broader ones that are better fitted to your new face. The bandages come off tomorrow evening. You have been asleep two days."

Feeling like a degenerated idiot, Mike pointed at his eyes, ran a hand over the bandage.

"You can't see anything anyway," McGivey said.

He repeated the motion insistently.

"Okay," the tall man said, walking to the dresser for a mirror. "You must be a narcissist."

He grasped the mirror by the mother-of-pearl handle, trembled as he raised it. He looked into his eyes. They were blue. They had been brown. The semi-transparent jelly concealed the rest of his

features. There were two dark holes where the tubes met the nostrils. There was a black and crimson slash down in there that would be a mouth. He could detect the faint trace of eyebrows. That was all.

He handed the mirror back.

"Tomorrow," McGivey said.

He nodded his head.

Tomorrow…

***

You dream of me often. Right? You know you do. I'm Zombie. They used to call me by a name that rhymes with my new one. They used to call me Society. It was a bad term. It was too comprehensive and too general, just as the new one is. But doesn't Zombie fit me? I mean, what with all the vacant stares, routines, patterns. Think of the vacant stares through the years. Go way, way back. Go way, way back to that girl—all names forgotten now, lost in the mists of Time—that got stabbed in some state called New York in some city of like name. There she is. See? Lying there on the doorstep of that house while he brings the knife up and down, up and down, up and down like the horses on a merry-go-round sliding on their oiled poles. Nothing merry here, though. Look in the picture window of that house. There at the corner of the pink drape. There are people standing there, staring, watching. Vacant, empty eyes. And take a peek, sly like, at all those other windows in all those other houses and buildings. Similar people with similar eyes. Fish stares. Ever see fish lying in shallow water, dying? They flop around a lot at first, but then they just lie there, staring sort of empty and at nothing in particular. These stares in these faces are like that. And all those faces on the subways and in the airplanes. The eyes of a nameless man sitting in a tower with a rifle across his lap, licking his

lips over and over. And the eyes of the people he killed: vacant. And you dream of me often, don't you? And maybe once in a while you dream of a time when you saw life in all those vacant eyes around you. You were on a tour of one of those quasi-world fairs. You had waited in line for three hours and twenty minutes and ten seconds; you knew it had been exactly that long, for the big light board overhead told you so. And all that time, those people spoke only two hundred words or so, mostly telling kids to shut up, requesting wives and or husbands to hold the place while they went to the bathroom or to get a drink. And vacant stares. Then, after so many blinks on the light board, everyone stepped through the double bronze doors that were like two metal lips, into the tunnel-like hallway— everyone smashed next to everyone else like layers in a human sandwich, staring at exhibits. And one exhibition put light into all those faces. You remember it. It was a display —educational—reproducing via models the fertilization of the female egg by the male sperm. There was a complete educational construction of all organs and parts involved that maintained the ancient, before-God rhythm of the act. Regularly (every ten minutes on the ten minutes!) fertilized the damn plastic egg. All those eyes were lighted up, watching the perfect machines demonstrate the human function. And you did not think it was lust in their eyes, did you? You were suddenly very damn afraid it was envy. Envy of the chromium male and the plastic female. After that, their eyes did not brighten, except when they passed other machines and other computers and the echo of the mechanical love-making sparked something momentarily in the dark corners of their minds. You dream of me often, don't you? You know you do.

He came out of the anesthetic as McGivey said, "Bandage off and all is well!"

He looked into the proffered mirror and knew it was so.

His forehead, under a thick cropping of hair black as a darkened stage, was broad and lightly lined. His blue eyes sparkled

intelligently. His nose was Roman, his lips straight —not too thin and not so full as to clash with the nose. His chin was firm. His ears lay flat against his head. He was striking—dashing.

"Congratulations!" he said.

"Not me. The machines."

Then began a period of eating well and sleeping soundly. There were sessions in the mechanical psychiatrist to obliterate all traumas accrued through the changing of identity. The food was good, the bed soft, the mechanical psychiatrist soothing. And he retained himself, what was Mike Jorgova. As the days wore on and new things were brought into his world—such as books that he was taught to read, music that was not filled with subliminals—he began to hate Anaxemander Cockley more and more. Harder and harder. He hated him for ruining the first twenty-six years of his life.

And the first twenty-four of hers…

She was with him wherever he went, through whatever he did. She was at the distant edge of all his thoughts, ready to speed to the front if he wished. She lurked, waited, inspired.

There was the memory of bringing her flowers when she was twelve and he fourteen. And of the picking of the petals and the things the picking foretold.

There was the memory of the first kiss…

And of the first sharing of love…

On the fourth day of his recovery, McGivey summoned him over the intercom to come to the pool area, on the entertainment shelf. He said there was a particularly important segment of Show that they should watch. He said to hurry.

The pool and overhanging entertainment shelf were marvels of engineering ingenuity and artistic taste. The pool was a giant, shimmering gem set in volcanic rock which had been imported from who-knew-where and which was sprinkled with plants similar to those on the fountain in the living room—green and orange. The pool was free-form, filled with hideaway corners, the complexity making it appear larger than it actually was. The shelf that hung above was railed in black iron except for a brief opening from which a swimmer might dive into the deepest part of the water. Further back from the edge were conical, limited-sound areas where one could sit and listen to music without disturbing anyone else in the general area. Behind that were bookshelves—with real books by the hundreds. This was a rarity, a thing owned only by the richest. But the books here were read. And that was even rarer. That was unheard of! Finally, there were three Show aura chairs. They were illegal, homemade jobs from Flaxen. They served two purposes: the doctor's place could be kept secret, for no Show serviceman would be needed to install the illegal set; secondly, these auras were not equipped with the standard snooper mikes that allowed Show to tune into any home, anywhere. It gave them a one-way window onto the rest of the world—something which only Anaxemander Cockley, perhaps, had.

McGivey was sitting in one of the chairs, aura off.

"What is it?"

"They are going to transmit your capture to the viewers."

"My—"

"Not really *your* capture. They cannot let the people think you have gotten away scot-free. You have to suffer. Besides, it gives them a chance to transmit some rougher action than usual. No one will care whether you are hurt, for you cheated everyone by running away."

"But who—"

"Watch it and decide for yourself." McGivey flipped on the toto-experience aura. It shimmered all colors around him, engulfing him. After a moment, Mike did the same.

***

The emotions of the police are not terribly clear, for they are not trained Performers with conditioned minds, muscle-flexed ids and egos. But they transmit something like hate. …

And you/he, Mike Jorgova, are sending back hate to them.

There is an alleyway to his/your left. There is an alleyway to his/your right. In front, the open highway where the sound of sirens echoes foggily through the night mists.

Left?

Right?

He/you is full of hate, bubbling and frothing. He/you is full of fear, bitter and sweet and tingling through his/your mind and heart. Blackness within and without. Visions of the Waters of Oblivion . . .

He/you turns right, suddenly moving with a great deal of speed. Legs pumping up and down, arms swinging, he/you tries to outrun Fate. But Fate, in the guise of police, appears at the end of the alleyway.

And they are big—and armed.

He/you turns and sees police at the other end too. Police with broad, bland faces, rather obscure. Then his/your face is rather

obscure too, for the machines can hardly handle all of that hate and fear.

There is a blue beam from a police weapon.

It hits his/your ear.

His/your ear splits open like a shredded lettuce leaf from a very ancient, wilted salad. It begins, spitting blood. He/you cries in agony as the beam from the other direction chars away his/your other ear. Yet he/you can hear things with his/your dead ears: the roaring of mysterious oceans, the screams of animals with horns where eyes should be, the rushing of cold wind. From the right, they blast away his/your nose, send him/you to the pavement babbling and gushing various liquids. And from the left, they stop the babbling by searing away his/your lips. They are advancing—constantly and steadily. He/you tries to stand. A beam strikes his/your legs, splits trousers and flesh alike. Blood and chunks of meat cascade down his/your leg, form a slick puddle on the alley macadam. He/you screams, but has no mouth. He/you is weeping. They burn out his/your eyes. But he /you is still transmitting: hate and fear. So they rupture his/your brain and—

Mike turned off the aura, sat quivering. There was a taste of partially digested things in his mouth. He fought the urge to be ill. "That wasn't a Performer. That was just a man in fear of his life. Anyone in dire enough straits would transmit that well; a Performer, however, would have put clear edges to it, brought minor emotions to the surface. Are the audiences really fooled?"

"They never saw a *trained* Performer die. They have nothing to compare this to."

"But," he protested, "it was obvious! There was no depth!"

McGivey shifted in his seat. "All right Perhaps the audience knows. Perhaps they really do know that that was not Mike Jorgova

being butchered in the dark alley."

"But they wouldn't tolerate the deception!"

"Why not?"

He fumbled for an answer.

"Look," McGivey went on, "they tolerate the cruelty of the killing in the first place. They see no real horror in what just took place—at least not enough to feel compelled to protest."

Mike felt his stomach tremble again.

"If they get a unique program, if they can experience Death without dying, feel exquisite tortures with no real harm, what do they care whether it is really Mike Jorgova transmitting or some poor idiot who was once a minor cog in the machine, a cog that has missed a turn or become obsolete?"

"They enjoy this sort of thing?"

"They must. It gets the highest ratings."

"I feel thirsty. For a Coolcola," Mike said. "Subliminals?"

"Yes. Show sells four times as many products with subliminals aired on a program like this. Excites the viewer's libido, which he satisfies through purchasing, purchasing, purchasing."

Mike whistled.

"There is one good thing that will come of this," McGivey said.

"Good?"

"Yes. You are now legally dead. You can enter the outside without fear of discovery."

"Do I go back for Lisa yet?"

"You're still determined to go back?"

"Yes."

"You Performers are a hearty lot Storm was the same way."

"Storm? Did he demand front line action too?"

"Yes. He was using a different name: Fredrick."

"Oh God!"

"Exactly. You are still determined on going for Lisa yourself?"

He thought of Tom Storm/Fredrick sprawling across the seat of the floater, his head gone. And he thought about Lisa and Cockley and held his resolve. "I'm going back for her."

McGivey sighed. "Very well. You will be taken to a secret training area next. You will learn all manner of self-defense, personal trickery, deceit, so on. You'll be put in the care of Nimmy, our best and number one man."

"Nimmy?"

"Roger Nimron. The President."

PART TWO:

LESSONS FOR A REVOLUTION

Chapter One

Mike Jorgova watched the barren fields flash past. Most of the snow had melted since his escape. Gray mounds of ugly slush lay at cliff overhangs where plows had shoved them. Muddy, brown earth showed through most places. Snow was a problem even for floaters, for it did not present a solid enough surface for the blowers. It sent the vehicles in weaving, bobbling flight paths that usually ended in disaster. In many of the newer highways, heating coils were being installed in the roadbeds to vaporize the snow before it could lay. In time, plows would be obsolete.

The fields, meantime, were barren.

But the sky was a bright and cheerful blue, and the contrast kept him from sinking into an emotional morass that had been lying stagnant in the rear of his mind all morning. It was a swamp of doubt. Again, he had no idea where he was going, why, or for exactly what purpose. "Further training" was a very vague phrase. He felt the gray smog of unbelonging creep over him again. In the distant corners of his mind, there was a flame named Lisa that burned through the overcast. Perhaps it was that which kept him going. Yet he did not wholly trust that flame. It was a symbol of love to him, yet he was not certain that he loved her. He had never known another woman. He had been conditioned to love Lisa. It was the knowledge of that which made him afraid. He wanted to overthrow Show. He hated Cockley and all the things the man stood for. But he was afraid that once he faced Lisa the flames would prove a false spark. His single purpose would be hollow and meaningless. It was a great fear; and it was black.

A flock of geese drifted from horizon to horizon.

He forced his thoughts from the pessimistic and tried to concentrate on a few of the mysteries he had not yet solved. He still

did not know where McGivey lived. The house was certainly underwater, for he had felt the pressure as they had left it, heard the turning of screws, felt the breaking free and switching to floater status. They did not remove the blindfold for thirty minutes. When he could see again, the only water was in the form of snow and melting snow in the drainage ditches. Now he was going to an equally mysterious place, one which harbored the President of the United States. McGivey had explained that Cockley's men had tried to kill Nimron, forcing the President to secrete himself while circulating public announcements that he had taken a short working vacation. No one questioned the announcement. Very few people even cared. Only slightly over a quarter of the populace could identify the President by name, the latest poll showed. People generally cared very little about the activities of a minor official.

"You had best blindfold yourself now, Mr. Jorgova," the driver said, handing him a white cloth.

"Again?"

"It's top secret."

"But I can be trusted."

"Until you take the Prober test—excuse my bluntness— we can't be sure."

"Prober test?"

"You'll find out in time."

He did not like the sound of it, but he snapped on the magnetic cloth and sat passively as the floater dipped, fluttered onward toward Roger Nimron and "further training." Half an hour later, the car paused. The driver said some nonsense phrase through the comsystem. There was a moment of silence, then a great rumbling. The air blades echoed now, the soft coughing resounding from

nearby walls. Then the rumbling sounded again, behind them this time.

"You can remove your blindfold," the driver said, getting out of the vehicle.

He did as told and found himself in a great cave whose floor was concrete and whose bats—mechanical—were round, with wheels instead of wings. The dark shapes, carrying men, fluttered through steel scaffolding from one bank of instruments to another. He got out and looked about. The size of the chamber was staggering. It was as large as six football fields. There were two dozen floaters parked in stalls along the far wall. Four jet fighters, two reconnaissance planes, two helicopters, and a tank rested to the left. To the right were shrouded, blunt shapes that suggested missiles.

"This way," the driver said, leading him to the gray doors of an elevator built into the solid rock.

Above, the metal bats scurried about. Their riders jumped out now and then to listen to a dial, a gauge, a graph. All the instruments of measurement talked incessantly, stating the temperature, the pressure, a million things. Thousands of ghosts in the ceiling. Their whispers carried to the floor, though indistinct and unreal.

The elevator doors yawned open, the mouth of a huge leviathan.

He got in. "Up?" he asked of the driver.

"Down," the driver answered.

"How deep are we?"

"Classified."

"Where are we?"

"Classified."

The fear of not belonging crept up, but the flame still burned.

The doors hummed open just as the lift jerked to a halt.

There were two guards.

One of them leveled a gun at him, shot him in the stomach…

***

"Is this really love?" she asked him. "Yes," he said. "I mean, *really* love?" she asked again. "I mean really yes, you silly pigeon." And he kissed her. "But what is love?" she asked. She tried to register curiosity and innocent inquiry, yet tinge it with lust. She was a new Performer, and she was constantly afraid of muffing it. She had to be on guard not to transmit her own, few secret emotions to the people at home—her fear of failure. She flushed out another wave of curiosity. "What is love?" he asked, repeating her question. "Love, my darling, is the moon when it is full and white." "Is that all love is?" she queried. "No. Love is lilacs. Love is roses. Love is holding hands on the first date and kissing on the second. Love is sharing a drink. Love is sentimentality, melancholia, sweetness and light." "Really?" she asked, puckering her full ripe lips. "All that?" she asked, feeling that all that was truly not very much. But the folks at home thought all these things constituted the essence of love. "And of course," he said, "this is love too." He reached for her— She was gone… A black-gray fuzz. Fade Out. Technicians ran everywhichway, but she was back before they had time to discover anything. There was fear stamped boldly across her face, though she could not name the fear that filled her. She could not remember anything from those missing ten seconds. Except a great deal of background noise.

Strange voices, strange noises, eerie screams. "And love is also this," he said, attempting to pick up where they had left off. "Love is—"

***

Mike was suddenly awake. And alive. His eyes clicked open, and he surveyed the room. There were two men in it—one a thin, dark, alert man in a gray one-piece suit, the other a stocky, heavily muscled man in a black jumper-suit with black boots to match. There was a scar on the second man's face that ran from his left ear to the edge of his lips.

"You passed," the thin one said.

"Passed what?" he asked. "The resurrection?" He was surprised his tongue was not slurring the words. It felt very thick.

"The Prober test. You are not harboring any thoughts of betraying the Revolution."

"I told them that. I—"

"We had to be sure."

He looked down at his stomach. "I was shot," he said, searching for a wound.

"With a sedative dart. Nothing more. Simple security precautions."

He pulled himself up in the chair, out of his slouched position. "And you two?"

"This is Pierre Fidel. Pierre will teach you every one of the fine arts of self-defense. He will make you a formidable fighter."

Pierre bowed. He was the one with the scar.

"And you?" Mike asked.

"I am Roger Nimron. Your instruction will alternate between physical training with Pierre and education of the mind with me. Your mornings will be spent in the gym, your afternoons in my office, your evenings in the gym again. Welcome to the army."

He forced himself to stand, though his knees were jelly-filled. "Could you tell me where I am now?"

Nimron smiled. "Three miles underground, beneath the Appalachian Mountains in what used to be Pennsylvania before the redistricting and renaming. This is a bomb shelter. It was built during the last years of the Cold War, when the threat of nuclear annihilation was greatest. In the first weeks of my Presidency, I destroyed all records of it, wiped all trace of it from the Washington computer and thus from all computers who might draw on Government tapes in the future. Then I began funneling Federal funds to Flaxen so he could secretly refurnish it, get it in working order. This is the last bastion of the Presidency against Cockley. This is where the Media Revolution will begin."

"Media Revolution."

"I'll explain it later. You begin your training with Pierre now. He will show you to the gym."

They shook hands all around, and Pierre led him from the room. He was struck by the thought that he still did not see what Flaxen or any of them stood to gain from a revolution. Were they as power hungry as Cockley, just wanting their slice of a different pie? He made up his mind to ask Nimron during the first of their instructional periods. He had to have an answer.

"This is the gym," Pierre said as the yellow doors lifted into the stone ceiling before them. It was a thirty foot by thirty foot room full

of exercising machines ringing a wrestling mat. "The pool is beyond those doors."

"Quite a bomb shelter," he said inanely.

"Not for a President," Pierre said sharply. Very little was obvious about Flaxen and Nimron and their group, but one thing stood out very clearly: they revered the past. The glory of the Presidency was a lost thing, but here it was clung to and nurtured.

"Of course not," he agreed.

"Over here," Pierre said, beginning to walk to the center of the mat. The man was all muscle. His arms corded, rippled as he swung them in time with his legs. His back writhed like the back of a jungle cat stalking prey. "How much do you know about self-defense?"

"Very little, I'm afraid. I always had bodyguards at Show."

"Naturally. But here you won't. You'll have to learn fast. The Revolution time schedule is constantly revised, updated. Cockley keeps gaining power more rapidly than expected. For instance, we did not expect him to try to kill Nimmy so soon."

Mike nodded.

"You'll get to know me well. You will work hard and learn quickly." He extended a hand to be shaken. Mike took it, felt himself thrust suddenly from his feet, twisted across the stocky man's shoulders. Then he was flying— birdlike. Then he was falling— stonelike and with pain. "The first lesson is never to trust anyone, any time, too completely."

And such was his introduction to Japanese arts of brawling. He saw that there was much to be learned. And much work to be done.

Four hours later the session ended. He was fed exquisite food that was only bland pap in his mouth, for the tang of his own blood had wiped his palate clean of all tastes save that one. He was put to bed in his room—a cubicle. He worried, still, about his lack of understanding of Flaxen and the others. He worried about Lisa. But none of these things kept him awake. The sheets grazed his skin, rustled beneath him. Even before the echo of their crumpling had died, he was asleep.

Chapter Two

Stick a straw in a milkshake and blow a bubble. The thick liquid rises, forming a dome as the air seeks to escape. Then it bursts with a *plop-slush* and disappears without even making a wave in the heavy surface of the drink. That is the result of a gas pellet striking its target. Except that the burst dome does not disappear. Fired at seven inches of steel, this happens: the metal expands in a bubble, growing greater and greater, thinner and thinner. Then it pops, only its edges are ragged where the milkshake was smooth, and the edges are permanent.

"It is a very deadly weapon," Pierre said, holding it up for Mike's inspection.

"I can see that."

The gun was small enough to be concealed in the palm of a man's hand. It was dull black, stubby, and with a fattened handle. "There are fifty shots of gas in the handle," Pierre continued. "When you depress the firing stud, one globule is propelled outward at terrific speed and under terrific pressure. It sinks into the target if your aim was good, just like a metal bullet. But here it differs from a bullet. The heat created by the friction as it sinks inward causes it to expand, turn from liquid to gas again. It explodes outward in every direction. The result to a human body is disastrous and distasteful—but nevertheless deadly."

Mike could imagine the appearance of a victim. He had to tear his mind away from visions of mangled corpses.

"And this," Pierre went on, putting the gas pistol down and picking up a slim, three inch piece of metal, "is a miniature throwing knife."

"Isn't that rather primitive when you consider the gas pistol?"

"A gas pistol makes noise. Very little, but it is not completely silent." He held up the tiny blade, turned it about so that the light caught its fine razor edge, glittered along it to the pinpoint. "This makes no noise. You may find yourself in a position where you must kill silently and yet are not close enough to do so with your hands. This is the time for a knife. Notice that it is double-bladed. There is a reason for that. You grasp it firmly by the middle with your thumb and first finger. When you throw it, you twist your wrist slightly to give it a spinning motion. You increase your chances of killing by one hundred percent."

"Each blade is only an inch long," Mike protested.

"It's all in your aim. Aim for the eye or the back of the head. Anywhere on the head, for that matter. Drive it into the brain."

"But will it penetrate the skull?" He felt like a straight man in some insane comic routine. He was certain it would penetrate the skull.

"Watch," Pierre said. He turned to the steel plating again, flicked his wrist. There was a faint *toing*! then silence.

The blade had sunk to the hilt in steel.

"It will drive completely through a skull. Not just to the hilt, but all of it. The blade is very sharp."

"And that is an understatement."

"Something to do with the molecules on the edge of the cutting surface. I do not understand the technicalities. Suffice to say that it works."

Mike shivered. "Hopefully, on someone else."

Pierre chuckled, throaty and full-mouthed. "But those are things you will learn later. You first must know how to defend yourself with your hands, feet, legs, and head. You must be a complete human fighting machine before you take on artificial aids. You can always lose a weapon or have it taken from you. Your body cannot be taken from you except through death. Your body is your last weapon, and first you must know how to use it completely. The judo we worked on yesterday is but a basic step. But you must know it forward and in reverse before we go on to more sophisticated techniques."

"It's going to be a pleasure learning from you, Pierre," he said, extending his hand.

Pierre took it, started to shake. A fraction of a second later, Pierre was flying through the air, crashing onto the mat, groaning to a sitting position. "You learn fast, Mike Jorgova," he said, grinning.

"I learned the hard way."

Pierre stood, approached. "And I'll make sure you learn a few more things that way since you seem to catch on best when hardship is attached to the lesson." He grabbed a chair from one of the small card tables, swung it. Mike ducked, swayed with the swing, reached and grabbed one end of the chair. They clutched it between them, grunting like savages for control. Mike felt the chair slipping, slipping. Then it was gone. Pierre brought it down on his side, checking the blow at the last second just enough so the slam was not incapacitating and yet hurt Mike.

"Never," Pierre admonished, helping Mike up from the mat, "try to muscle another man who is stronger than you. The correct tactic is cunning in that case. Dodge him until you have a clear opening. The opening will always be different, always come at different times in the fight. But the other man will leave himself unprotected sooner or later. Dodge and wait for that moment if he is bigger than you."

Mike grabbed the chair, swung it at Pierre, who caught it and held it. Mike's shoulder hurt like hell, but he started muscling his instructor. Then, abruptly, he let go of the chair, clutched another, swung it as Pierre stumbled, regaining his balance. The blow knocked the bigger man off his feet and must have hurt him. But he managed to laugh anyway.

"So it is to be the School of Hard Knocks," Pierre said.

"That's a horrible pun."

"And that was horrible fighting. Suppose there had not been a second chair?"

"But there was. And you said every situation is different I'm just proving my cunning."

"Well, you better keep your mind this sharp. We have two more hours before lunch."

Mike grinned, stood hunched on the tips of his toes, ready to spring either way to avoid the hairy Frenchman. He liked Pierre. Pierre had given him something which he had not even realized that he lacked: self-confidence. Yesterday, the teacher had allowed Mike to throw him a few times. Mike was certain it had been planned to boost his ego. And somehow it had. Just as a child knows he is not winning a game with his father—and yet does believe it at the same time. Show had drained his self-confidence and self-reliance. It was coming back now. With it, there rose a liking for Flaxen and the others. They were not so ominous and strange any longer. They were men—like Pierre— whom you could strike out at. He could never have struck out at Cockley. Never.

***

"I want him found!" Cockley roared at Howard Connie.

"But, sir—"

"Roger Nimron is obviously at the head of all this. I want him found! I *want him killed!"*

"Damnit, there isn't a trace of him!" Howard Connie was immediately sorry he had shouted. And he was immediately afraid.

Cockley stared at him a moment, his black eyes very black indeed. There was a clicking. Cockley held his hands out for Connie to see. Protruding from each thumbnail was a thin, pointed blade. Cockley turned his hands over, palms up, showed the sleek undersides of the stilettos.

The seconds ticked by. Neither man moved.

At last Cockley said, "Connie, you came close. You came damn close to getting your throat slit."

"I—"

"Shut up!"

Connie felt his knees shivering. He lowered himself into the nearest chair. He was not going to be killed. He could calm down now—yet he knew he could not.

"You never did find the black limousine, Connie. That's mistake number one. And the President wasn't killed by the spider you recommended. That was number two. Now you say you can't find Nimron. I am going to pretend I did not hear that; I'm going to pretend you were not here today. I'm going to call you back in forty-eight hours and ask you the same question: 'Where is Roger Nimron?' You better have an answer. Three mistakes, Connie, are fatal in this business."

Connie knew when he had been dismissed. He rose and left quickly. He was still trembling when he reached his own office. The atmosphere of the smaller work areas was a buzz of activity, agents and messengers coming and going, papers being shuffled from desk to desk. He stopped at Miranda Mins's desk. He was too scared at the moment to appreciate the dark peaks of her breasts in the semi-transparent blouse with the yellow giraffes dotting it. "Get me head of Research," he said. "Get me Malone."

Miranda Mins punched out Malone's office and told him to come running. When the call was placed, she turned and looked at her boss as he entered his inner office and closed the door. *He must be some goddamn oddie*, she thought. I *have to fight the rest of them off when I wear this, and he doesn't even notice*. She turned back to her paper work, thinking that maybe she would ask for a transfer to the offices of one of the younger department heads —one who might care about certain things…

In his office, Connie slumped into a chair, requested nerve pills (two packets) and a glass of wine from his console. These things popped into the tray—the pills in plastic seals and the wine in a capped, plastic tumbler. He took both packets, even though he knew it would go down on his record, and sipped the wine carefully. It tasted like plastic, but it tasted good.

The door slid back, and Malone entered. He was tall, thin, an intense man in his late twenties, some of the "new blood" Cockley had brought into Show—after spilling some of the old blood all over his office floor, no doubt. Connie thought of the blades in the thumbs, shuddered.

"You wanted to see me?" Malone asked.

He's an arrogant snot, Connie thought. But he was a good research man. And some day he would get so good that he would move up one more notch into the Department of Plan Execution.

Connie's department. And he would take Connie's job. "Cockley wants research done on this Nimron thing," he said, letting the bitterness seep through in his words.

"We've done all we can!"

"Perhaps not. I want you to hit a new angle. The Presidents of earlier days had a great number of hideaways. Camp David, the Virginia Bunker, so on. Go back as far as you can and dig out everything on that subject you can find. If necessary, use the printed materials."

"But, that's—illegal!"

"It's not exactly illegal, and especially not for Show."

"Nothing is illegal for Show. Just find out where Nimron could be. I want everything you can gather, and I want it in twelve hours."

"Twelve—"

"Shut up and get moving!" he shouted.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Connie," Malone said, backing out and bowing in a mockery of respect.

Damn him! Connie thought. *Damn him to Hell! But only after he gets the information. Only then*.

***

It was one o'clock when Mike finished lunch. Pierre was still eating. "Where do you put it all?"

"This is all energy food and protein. It either builds muscles or maintains them. I don't eat frills."

When Mike looked at the raw meats and fish and vegetables, he could see that was true. He supposed he tended toward frilly foods himself, but he could not imagine choking the uncooked meat down. Out of the question. "I'm due in Nimron's office now," he said.

"Good luck."

He nodded, walked through the densely packed aisles, edging around the extra tables that had been shoved in, stepping over litter. He had been amazed by the number of people working on this little project to overturn the world. There were three thousand of them, give or take a score. It was actually a small force in relation to Show, but considering the powerful weapons, old and new, and the facilities at their disposal, it was a formidable force. Still, he did not think it was formidable enough.

He stepped through the doorway into the hall and took the elevator to the floor that contained Nimmy's offices. He found the proper door, paused a moment, pressed the button beside it. The camera swiveled on him. A moment later, the door opened.

He stepped in, allowed the door to hum shut behind. He was in a small foyer, carpeted in gold with walls of mirrors. One of the mirrors lifted, revealing another room beyond the wall. He stepped through into this room, gasped slightly. It was medieval in design. Medieval design had died out long before he had been born. The past hundred years had been one of traditional modern (a phrase he found oddly contradictory) in furniture, clothing, homes, everything. Here everything was deliciously out of date. The ceiling was vaulted, constructed of what appeared to be real wooden beams. Above that, in darker shadows, he could see the hint of bomb-proof steel and concrete, but the immediate surroundings were cut from some ancient castle and set down inside this mountain. The floor was marble. White swirled with red and tinted with gold here and there, it was rich and wondrous. The walls were dark walnut paneling, their smooth facades broken only by a huge fireplace where logs crackled,

coals glowed, smoke rose. A desk rested before the fireplace, and at the desk sat the dark man who was Roger Nimron. His eyes were more than tri-dimensional. They burned into Mike, evaluated him. Then they smiled.

"Welcome to my *sanctum sanctorum*, Mike." He stood, walked around the desk.

At first, Mike was wary of the proffered hand. But he reminded himself that this was no gymnasium and this man was no Pierre. "Mr. President—"

"You call me Roger, and I'll call you Mike, okay? Formalities died out of this office a number of years ago."

"Thank you—Roger."

"You're awfully formal, you know. Well have to break you of that, take some of the starch out of your jumpersuit. No one here is intrinsically worth any more than anyone else. Admittedly, some are more valuable or more important than others, but we are all basically equal. Besides, you are an important individual. You are equal to all here and more important than most."

"Still, it isn't easy getting used to speaking with a President."

"There. See? You aren't really as impressed as you might think. You said *a* President instead of *the* President."

Mike looked about the room, let his eyes fondle the ornate gold candlesticks, the heavy, natural wood furniture. The detail and the glory of it hurt his eyes.

"Yes," Nimron said, seeming to follow Mike's line of thought, "perhaps the grandeur here put you off balance. It is a fascinating room, isn't it? There are three more in these quarters like it—all very lavish. The man who had it constructed—long dead—must surely

have been an egotist. Imagine spending all that money on pomp when he would only have occasion to use it if the rest of the world was being burned to ashes. It seems almost anachronistic in light of the situation it was constructed to be used under."

"Is it really true wood?"

"And real gold. Note the fireplace too. It would have been impossible to have a fireplace in a nuclear war, for the flue would permit radiation into the shelter unless angled a great many times. And angling would have trapped the smoke. For an answer, they came up with an ingenious water filtration system that does away with the smoke that rises up this pseudo-flue. It must have cost a small fortune in itself. Millions could die, evidently, as long as the few lived in luxury."

"Amazing."

"And terrifying in a way. Here we are, hoping to restore the old world with its old form of democratic rule, and it seems that injustices existed just the same as they do today. Sometimes, I wonder…"

Mike swallowed the little bit of saliva that had managed to collect in his mouth and pulled his thoughts back to practical things. "What are you trying to do exactly? What does Andrew Flaxen have to gain from all this? How did he get connected with you?"

"Those are questions enough for the first session," Nimron said, laughing. "Pull that chair over to this one, and I'll begin answering some of them."

Mike dragged the heavy-cushioned, hand-carved chair to the one like it. He was thinking about the smile on Nimron's face. That was the largest difference between the Show world and the world of these Revolutionaries. People smiled here. He liked that difference.

"Andrew Flaxen is, first of all, independently wealthy, for his family invented and made the first floaters. The Flaxens amassed so much money that they were not hurt very much when Show eventually took over their company along with the others."

Mike's eyebrows rose. He had entertained the idea that Flaxen was after money, for that was the only reason he could dredge up. Now that reason was full of holes. Big holes.

"And Andrew is a Romanticist," Nimron went on. "He yearns for some sort of back-to-the-old-world trend. He collects books and old movies. He even knows how to read and write extremely well and has from the time he was a small youngster."

"But the rich were among the first to give up those skills."

"Not all the rich. Most have given up reading and writing because the talents make them suspect Anyone who would spend that much time learning nearly useless skills in this modern world where all machines talk and all arts are visual, Cockley figures, must be a reactionary. Andrew never advertises the fact he can read or write. He uses voice code for checks, card-tapes for everything. It was he who taught me to read. He knew my father, who was also an incurable Romanticist. He taught both of us. I have been literate since I was fourteen, but very few people know it. It is a secret to all but those in this complex and a few conspirators outside. Even so, Cockley tried to kill me."

"Cockley is moving faster and faster all the time," Mike said to show that he understood some of the immediacy of their cause.

"And we must move faster too. He doesn't suspect Andrew yet. I doubt that he suspects most people who are involved. We play a safe game. But he is suspicious of me now and he will begin to look more closely at a number of other people. To answer your question more explicitly, Andrew stands to gain the freedom to read and to write and to publish what he has written. And I stand to see my

wishes for the old and glorious world—dreams that they may be — fulfilled. Revolutionaries seldom have greater desires than this, Mike. We are generally too unselfish for our own good."

"And my part?"

"We did not want to risk you, but you insisted on front line action. We want Lisa pulled out, so you will accomplish that. If we can get Lisa out, you and she can begin broadcasting a jamming series of experiences that override Show's own. That will signal the beginning of the Revolution. Our broadcasting facilities are nearly ready."

Mike stifled what surely must have been a gasp of astonishment rising in his lungs, forcing its way toward his throat. He knew they were going to overthrow Show. That was their purpose. But he had never actually thought Show would not be broadcasting anymore. That was very nearly an unthinkable thing. Yet, he told himself now, that was logical. He had never been taught to question the broadcasts of Show; they were something that would go on eternally, something without end, timeless. "But what would you broadcast to disrupt Show?" he asked finally.

"Hatred for the audience. Hatred for the sloths, the unexperienced worms they have become. They won't be able to take the psychic shock—our psychiatrists believe—of experiencing themselves hating themselves. Remember, when they are under the aura, they *are* the Performer. Any emotion the Performer has is also their emotion. When you hate them, they are going to experience self-hatred. We're hoping it will be unpleasant enough to make people turn off their sets. In the resultant confusion, the raids on all Cockley establishments will be launched. We have to capture all Show executives, jail them until the Revolution is complete and the power is finally and forever wrenched from their hands."

Mike's mind was chockablock full of new concepts, new ideas, new questions. He was finally confronted with blunt plans instead of vague theories; he could finally see how the world would be overturned and just how reasonable it actually seemed. His mind spun down its own corridors of thought, producing a small headache behind his eyes. The scope, the objectives of the Revolution were astounding. Even without the beckoning flame of Lisa, he might have joined their ranks, fought with them just to be a part of a plan so daring and yet practical. Still, there was Lisa. That was an added incentive, another firm reason that he should be part of the Media Revolution.

"I think this is more than enough for one day," Nimron said, standing. "Mull over what you know now. Think about every angle of it. Tomorrow you will have a great many new questions. I am very certain of that."

Mike exited through the foyer of mirrors.

He went to his floor, to his room. He lay down to think.

And to rest for the coming session with Pierre.

There was a flame in his mind, its roots were somewhere very deep in his heart.

***

You are dreaming of me again. Zombie. That's okay. I like the opportunity to shoot my mouth off. No one shoots his mouth off anymore. I would like to tell you of my history. I would like to go way back and tell you—show you —how I have changed over the years, decades, scores, centuries. Once I was called Village instead of Zombie. Then I was called Society. Then they called me Village again for a time. Now it is Zombie because the village concept and the village itself has dwindled into a household. Into a few

individuals, actually. Let me explain. Men are what they are, not because of *what* they say, but because of *how* they say it. *Speech*: When men merely spoke, telling their clean and dirty stories, they called me Village. I was a close-knit thing. A man can shout only so far, a few hundred yards at best. His words are then carried on by others, but they are distorted and the true meaning, the intended meaning, stretches to a relatively short radius. So I was Village when men spoke only. *The Printed Word*: It followed the alphabet and the written word. It made big changes in men—in me. What a man said—exactly what he said—could be carried great distances. Men could emulate the writer's lofty thoughts; men could laugh at his dirty stories a hundred miles away. A thousand. Men began to think differently. Not because of what they read but because they read it at all. Because of the printed word, men began to separate concept from action. Statement and deed were two distinct things which fewer and fewer men used together. Men began to draw apart. They now called me Society. For a long while, I grew and grew like some cancerous fungus. When I could grow no more, when I filled all the corners, they began to call me something else. They called me Village again. *Electronics*: They called me Village because they began to invent things that constricted society, that drew society in, in, in. They were trying to return to their collective racial womb. Their priests were strange ministers indeed: television, radio, quick-and-swift newspapers. The world shrank to the size of the moon. Then a single state. A city. A neighborhood, a house, a room. But they did not stop there, see? They continued shrinking things, drawing everyone closer and closer with their electronic wonders. It was not enough for them to have made the complete circle from Village to Village again. They began to imagine that the circle was really a mobius strip and they were always on the same side despite their frantic efforts to bring changes and more changes. Then came *Show*. Now they call me Zombie. There are seven hundred million subscribers to Show, but those millions are really only four people. They are all the Performers of the day program and Performers of the night program. The Government supports them because the Government is the program. They used to call a thing like that "a

vicious circle." Seven hundred million and four ids and egos and superegos compressed into four bodies. Amazing, isn't it? Frightening too. It should not be frightening, for there were prophets who foretold these things which have come to pass. There was MickLooan or some such person. He or she predicted this whole thing, baby. Only this person *wrote* his prophecies. See? And no one reads anymore…

Chapter Three

Roger Nimron shifted in his chair, puffed on his black pipe, and continued. "You see, the environment we create becomes our only method of describing our role in it. Printing created sequential thought, linear thought. Then came television, making all men closer together, less individual. Then Show. We have reverted from the village stage of society to a stage man has never seen before—a sort of gestalt. Something even worse is bound to happen if this continues."

Chapter Four

"I *don't understand it," he said to the doctor as they stood in the hallway outside of his wife's hospital room, "I simply don't understand*."

There was the smell of disinfectant, antiseptics, alcohol.

"It must have been longer than you said," the doctor argued. He was an elderly physician whose years of experience gave him the right to argue, or so he seemed to feel.

"It was only seven hours. I was only gone that long!"

The doctor scowled. "No one enters an Empathist trance in seven hours. It takes days!"

The door to the room opened, and a younger doctor stepped into the hall. "The electric shock won't work. She's too far gone."

"Seven hours, I swear," the husband said.

Other places, in other cities, there were presently twenty-three similar cases being attended to....

Chapter Five

Jake Malone held the phone very close to his ear and waited. He was nervous, but he knew he could control it. He could clamp firm hands on any case of nerves he had ever met up with, choke it into submission. He raised his hand, stared at it. Not one tremble. Or was it that his eyes were trembling too, thus voiding any possible neutral observation? His mouth was dry, certainly. He swallowed a bit of water, lubricated his lips.

"Yes?" the ghost tone said on the other end—ghost thunder, rather.

"Sir, this is Jake Malone. Head of Research?"

"What is it?"

He used his most humble voice. "I have come up with something that may be valuable in the search for Roger Nimron, but my superior, Mr. Connie, refuses to include it in the report. He says there is no value in it."

There was a moment of silence on the other end. Then: "Go on."

"I think, Mr. Cockley, that there may be a chance that Nimron is hiding in one of the old Presidential rest spots or nuclear weapon shelters. I would have to go back into the written records, of course, use a translating computer that can read them. But I strongly believe that we may find Nimron if we research this." He stopped. He had had his say. Now there was only the waiting.

"You come up to my office, Jake. In… half an hour."

"Yes, Mr. Cockley. I just thought this should be aired. I don't want to cause Mr. Connie any trouble."

"Half an hour." The connection was suddenly broken.

He sat numb, nearly paralyzed, for a time. The intervening half hour would be when Cockley talked to Connie. Who would he believe? It was one helluva chance to take. If Cockley thought he, Malone, was lying, he would be out of Show altogether. But if he thought Connie was the liar, Malone would very possibly be advanced to a higher position—Connie's position.

Half an hour later when he walked through the door of Cockley's office and saw Howard Connie's inert body on the floor, sticky and red, he knew the answer. He had been promoted. But he was no longer so very sure that he wanted the job.

***

"Let me see your hand," Pierre said, taking Mike's long, thin hand in his hammier one.

"I've been pounding the bricks like you said."

The Frenchman examined the callus that had built up, yellow-brown and tough. He pressed a nail into it, watched Mike's face. When the taller man did not wince, he let go. "Thick enough, I guess. Now you will go to the surgeon for the rest of this session."

"Surgeon?"

"A minor operation, nothing serious."

"But why—?"

"Look," Pierre said, taking a human bone and placing it in the practice vise, drawing it in tight. "This is a plastic model of the hip bone of a man with all the strength of the real bone." He raised his hand, swung it down. The bone cracked. A second blow split it wide open, sent it tumbling out of the vice.

"So? You've broken bricks and lumber before."

"Yes, but this is an object lesson. Karate is a gymnasium sport. It is not always something you can use in a fight. Almost anyone can break a brick or board. It is a matter of confidence—and of aiming at a point *beyond* the object you really wish to strike so as not to unconsciously check your blow. But in a fight, there may be too much happening for you to remember this look-beyond-the-target rule, and you may not have as much self-confidence as in the gym. That is why you will have a steel plate embedded in your callus."

"Steel plate?"

"A smooth, rounded plate. Thin but tough enough to greatly fortify your callus. It is backed by very tiny shock rings that will absorb the blow to protect the bones of your own hand. Remember, your opponent will not be willing to climb into a practice vise and tighten his arm, leg or neck into striking position for you."

Mike laughed, feeling more at ease. At least he would be losing no more of his identity. He would not have liked to have his voice changed again, for he was finally used to that. And his blue eyes were brighter and more intriguing than his brown ones had been. This was a utility incision, not a major change.

He found the surgeon's quarters, allowed the kindly, gray-haired man to strap him in, and was propelled into the wall slot. There was no anesthetic this time, for the slitting of the callus would not engender pain. There was only womb-like warmth and womb-like darkness, sterile, pure, and endless. Far into the machine's innards, there were whirring sounds and the clicking of programmed tapes

falling into place. Nearby, there was the smell of antiseptic, the feeling of it cool as it slopped onto his hand. Then there was a tickling, a dull scraping sensation, then quiet. His hand was held perfectly motionless in the steel fingers that were somehow soft. He could tell when the plate was slipped in, for it sent an odd shiver through his body. He could tell when they were welding the callus shut, slapping a little speedheal over the last traces of the incision. Then there was a whirring, grinding, ratcheting. He slid into light again.

"Let me look," the surgeon said.

He held out his hand.

"Perfect."

Mike nodded, started to speak.

But the old man went by him and approached the cavernous maw of the machine, the robo-surgeon. Mike realized the compliment had been meant for the machine. The doctor bent over it, cooing, complimenting the incision and the welding. He left him with his metal friend and went to Nimron's office.

Nimron had been the most vital influence on Mike's acceptance of all things expected of him. The man was warm, capable, friendly. There was nothing he refused to take time to explain. Mike now understood the workings of the Media Revolution. The purpose was to bring back books, movies, poetry, and writing. In this way, the Romanticists hoped to bring man back to the way he had once been. A return to the past. Nimron was always quoting some poet named Walt Whitman. Mike also understood that though his part was a major one, the rest of them worked just as hard and risked just as many things as he. They were all, actually, risking their lives. And there was no greater thing to risk.

The outer door to the Presidential quarters opened after the camera had surveyed him. The door in the mirrored foyer, however, was already open when he entered. He stepped into the main room, still somewhat awed by it, even after so many visits.

"How is the hand?" Nimron asked.

He knew everything that went on in the complex, what each man was doing. He had a fantastic memory for details like personal and family history of each conspirator. He could talk conversationally about the affairs of any man he met during the course of a day if that man was a conspirator. Anything he said ceased to amaze Mike, no matter how all-knowing the comment seemed to be. "It's okay," he answered. "It feels a bit stiff though."

"In a few days, you'll forget it is there." He smiled. "Until you have occasion to use it, that is."

Mike plopped into the familiar chair, fingered the lion heads at the end of each arm. "What is it today, Roger?"

"Today we talk about your assignment."

"No more background?"

"No."

"When do I start?"

"Tomorrow."

He swallowed a lump in his throat. There was supposed to be a longer break between training and action, a few days to rest. "I was under the impression—"

"Things have changed. We have word that Cockley is doing some shaking up in his staff. He dumped his top executive for a

younger man, Jake Malone. Malone is going to go as far back in the written records as he can. He will be searching for Presidential hideaways like this one. That means they are going to find us sooner or later—most likely sooner."

"But are the rest of the Revolutionaries ready? The commando teams? The broadcasting facilities for when Lisa and I—"

"All prepared, all ready."

Mike wriggled in the chair, watched the flames leaping in the fireplace, the smoke rising to be filtered in some huge water jug up in the concrete walls somewhere.

"Malone's promotion is a blessing we had not expected," Nimron said. "This is Malone." He handed over a photograph, hesitantly. "But this is me!" Nimron didn't speak. "You changed me to look like Malone!"

"You were not told you would look like another man, I admit. We tried to make you think you had a one hundred percent choice in the matter of your looks. It was disturbing enough to your ego to have any change at all. The knowledge that you were going to be a carbon copy of someone else—well, that may just have been too much at the time. You might not have stood for it. You may have caused problems." Nimron watched him carefully for a reaction.

At one time, he would have had a very violent reaction. But now it did not matter so much. He was part of something bigger than himself, yet he worked for himself. In Show, it had not been like that; he had worked for everyone but himself, for Show and its executives, for Cockley, and for the seven hundred million at home, the drooling ones. Now he was living a better life. If a look-alike plan was called for, it was something he would just have to swallow. And he did. "Go on," he said.

"I'm glad you aren't upset. We were afraid, even this much later, that you might react negatively."

"I'm in this too deeply to argue anymore. Besides, I look better now than I ever did."

Nimron smiled, continued. "We're going to remove the real Malone and replace him with you. He was the only man in Show who had your general bone structure in the face, your exact height. You can pass for Jake Malone through any test they care to run."

"My blood and eyes and new voice… ?"

"His."

"And perhaps I can stop the correct information about this shelter from getting to Cockley," Mike said after a protracted pause. "According to the reports I give him, there will be no shelter like this."

"Unless he already has those reports."

"Then the dance is drawing to a finish."

"And we will be working on just that assumption. You have to get Lisa out of there and to the rendezvous point in the basement garage of Cockley Towers within twenty-four hours of your replacement in the Show buildings."

"That is very little time."

"There isn't much time left for anyone," Nimron said, the weariness suddenly showing through worn spots in his perpetual shield of energy.

Mike looked back to the photograph. "I look like, smell like, even sound like this man. But how do I know what his personality is

like?"

"We have that," Nimron said, producing a folio of yellow papers, opening it. "Malone is arrogant with everyone but Cockley. He is intelligent and he knows it. He is extremely ambitious. There is some question whether he may have been instrumental in getting his previous superior done in. He has reached the top of his profession, and he can be expected to rub it in to everyone else while letting the boss know he is still humble and still subservient and probably always will be where the old man is concerned. He instinctively fears Cockley."

"Everyone fears Cockley."

"And Cockley knows it. But from our records, Malone manages to conceal the outward symptoms of his fear while letting Cockley know he has it beneath the surface just the same."

"In other words, I can't let my knees shake when I'm with Cockley."

"Exactly."

Mike wondered about that. He thought that, perhaps, it would be an impossible thing.

***

Malcom Malcom and his wife sat down and flicked on their auras. He was feeling lusty tonight. She was in the mood for bathos. They would get a good deal of both on the evening program. Show always gave the viewer the right thing: just so much violence, so much sex, this much love, that much hate, violence, and happiness.

They began flowing into the minds of the two young Performers. They were watching what was happening; but Malcom

Malcom realized he was becoming, somehow, less aware of things instead of more aware. His mind seemed to be slipping even beyond the mind of the Performer he wished to be a part of. It slipped through the mind, kept going. At first, he thought it was merely a new sensation Show had devised. Then it was more frightening than curious. Then downright horrifying. He tried to call his mind back to his body, but he could not. He fought harder. There were now only bursting bubbles around him…

Emp...

path…

ist....

The bubbles said "Empathist" like wind scraping against bare trees.

They said it like seafoam on seafoam on—

Like voices of birds. Messages of terror.

Malcom Malcom, screaming, gave up his body and became part of something else, something infinitely larger. And Mrs. Malcom Malcom was screaming too…

They had been under the aura only four minutes.

***

That night, Mike Jorgova dreamed a dream. It was a replay, actually, of one of his performances with Lisa. But it seemed fresher now than it had the first time. It bit, scraped, caressed his senses.

They were on a picnic. The table was set with all sorts of delicious things: fruits of red, fruits of yellow, sandwiches both tiny and large, coffee and cake.

And there was Lisa.

Her hair was golden, framed by the blue sky where an almost-but-not-quite-equal goldness burned. Her eyes were blue. It was as if pieces of her head had been cut out, allowing the sky to show through. Her lips were like the skins of the apples lying on the tablecloth.

Her hand trembled. Lisa always trembled through every performance.

In her eyes, he could see himself—tall and handsome. With brown eyes. No, blue. Brown. Blue. He became increasingly confused about the color of his eyes. And the shape of his nose. The line of his chin. From that moment on, the dream became a nightmare.

PART THREE: REVOLUTION!

Chapter One

At two o'clock in the morning, the main spire of Cockley Towers stood like a giant concrete and steel tree, its main shaft the trunk, its balconies and overhanging, glass-floored rooms the branches and the leaves. There were scattered lights glowing in the upper floors. The ground lobby was a blaze of warm, orange light. The dark floater drifted silently across the lawn, lights out, a slow, nocturnal butterfly. There was a driver, a second bodyguard, and Mike Jorgova seated within the cave-like interior.

"Alarm line directly ahead," the bodyguard said.

"Breaks anywhere?" the driver asked.

"Hmm. No. Solid. Rings the building, apparently."

The craft slowed behind a line of shrubs, stopped. Mike leaned over the seat to watch the green scope pulsate yellow in one thin line that curved from one corner of the screen, down to the middle, and back up and out of the opposite corner.

"How broad?" the driver asked.

"Ten, maybe twelve feet."

"If we trip it, every guard in the tower will be down here, pulverizing us with vibra-pistols." The driver motioned to a gate that had no fence on either side of it. It stood, absurd and improbable, alone. The pathway to the glass lobby doors, however, led from it. "That's the visitor post. Mike, do you suppose you could go over and ring the bell? They ought to let a resident in, especially one as important as Malone. Tell them you forgot your card-key to activate

the lock. We'll be right behind you in those bushes to the left of the gate."

Mike fingered the gas pistol that lay up his sleeve in a leather strap affair. One sharp downward jerk would bring it into his hand, in firing position, spitting destruction. He had not yet fired it upon a human target, but he had seen pictures of its victims. Pierre thought it wise that he see the results of the weapon prior to actual combat so that the shock might not slow his reflexes. There were headless corpses in those pictures, faceless heads, inside-out people. Even for Lisa, even to save his own life, it was a horrible death to visit upon a man. But he felt he could depress the stud if he had to. It was depress it and kill or *not* depress it and *be* killed.

They got out of the floater, crawled, hunched, and ran across the lawn to other shrubs. Mike stood then and approached the bellpost, a waist-high, simu-wood sentry capped with a white, plastic button.

Dingadingading.

There was a stirring in the lobby. A large, dark man in a greatcoat came to the glass doors, looked down the hundred feet of walk to the bellpost. He hesitated for a long moment, then opened the door, came out walking warily but not slowly.

"Forgot my card-key," Mike said off-handedly when the man reached him.

The doorguard's shoulders were two oak planks nailed to his neck. His nose had been broken once, jutting out now at odd angles to itself. "Mr. Malone?" he asked, obviously confused.

Mike remembered to act like Malone and not himself. "Who do I look like? A common doorguard?" It was all in a sarcastic tone.

"But you went upstairs more than half an hour ago."

"And I came out again."

"I been sitting in the lobby," the big man said, scratching his forehead, "and I didn't see you."

"You could not see your own face in a mirror if someone didn't point it out for you." He liked that one and had to refrain from smiling. "Now open this gate!"

The doorguard hesitated a moment, then withdrew a card-key from his pocket, slipped it into the proper slot. The gate swung open, the only pathway around the alarm band.

The driver and the bodyguard came from the bushes, rushed the Show man.

"Hey!" He moved to bring his own foot down on the nearby alarm band.

Suddenly Mike found the gas pistol in his palm, his finger on the cool stud and moving down. Pierre had trained him well. He had not even wasted a second in deciding upon a course of action and launching himself on it. The rest seemed like it happened in slow motion, but he knew he was moving very fast. It was just the detachment from action that Pierre had taught him, the ability to perceive your actions almost as a third party—even to comment to yourself on what you were doing as you did it. This mingling of thought and action was a lost art, one seldom seen in the modem world.

Slow motion: his finger crept downward, slowly, slowly, pressing the stud into the handle. The foot of the doorguard glided agonizingly through the air, closer, slightly closer to the hidden alarm. Mike's fingers felt a bit of resistance as the stud was completely depressed. Then the pellet came from the gun. Even detached as he was, seeing things almost from a different dimension, the bullet was only a blur to his eyes, a streak that he

may have seen or that may have been his imagination. Easily, he released the stud, prepared to shoot again. The pellet sank through the greatcoat, through the man's shirt, into his chest. The foot stopped falling toward the alarm, jerked upward in a tangled-nerve reaction. A realization of death swept across the guard's face. He didn't even have time to be startled, just afraid. A mild fear that had slept in his soul and now rose slowly to spread across his features. Then blood came spinning out of his chest. Blood and flesh. The gore spattered the sidewalk. The blood twirled, lazily, like little marbles of clotted jelly, showering upon them, spattering their faces.

"You're fast," the floater-driver said, breaking the tableau.

The body lay on the icy ground, the face a drained, white fish belly.

"Let's go," Mike breathed. He was suddenly in control of the situation, a leader instead of a follower. Perhaps it was because he was now irrevocably involved; there was no turning back. He had made the decision to kill, and that decision had bound him to the cause and the fray without any chance of extricating himself. He was relieved rather than frightened. There were no choices anymore, merely the one pathway that must be followed: get Lisa. He would move quickly now. He helped them dump the body in the shrubs, tuck it neatly out of sight.

They reached the doors of the lobby and peered in cautiously. It was an immense room punctuated by many thick pillars. The furniture was, of course, neo-mod, tasteful in its lack of taste. There was no other person in sight. They opened the doors, went in.

"The thirty-eighth floor," the driver said.

"Elevator?" the bodyguard asked.

"The wealthy go in for real human servants instead of auto-servs," Mike said. "We better use the stairs."

They found the staircase and had gone up two flights when they met a tenant coming down. He was a small man, leading a brown dog on a silver leash. The driver saw him first and was shooting before Mike looked up. But his first shot missed, and the tenant was armed. Mike wanted to scream at the driver. They could have tried to bluff their way up, avoided a fight, but the other man's nerves were too taut, vibrating too much. Now they would have to fight. The tenant's first shot struck the bodyguard with a flash of gore. Mike wiped some of the blood from his face and leaped behind the down body.

The driver fired again, tore the tenant's leg off with a misplaced shot that had been meant for the groin. The limb, from the knee down, came tumbling down the steps, bone jutting out of the top. It was surrealistic and realistic at the same time. The tenant toppled against the wall. His face was a face of ash, white and gray and ready to crumble. His mouth hung open in disbelief. His fingers punched, punched, punched the trigger of his weapon like an automatic plunger. One of the wild beams smashed into the driver's throat, ripped it open, sending a bloodfall of liquid down over his chest. Mike choked, fired his gas pistol and put the tenant out of his mindless misery.

There were three bodies on the stairs. They sprawled in their own and each other's life fluids, faces distorted and bodies white from the great loss of blood. Blood. There was too much of it lying around to be wiped away with a handkerchief. He could not hope to get rid of the evidence. Besides, there was the dog cowering in the ruins of his master. He was whimpering now, but his voice would become a howl soon. Mike double-timed it up the steps, around one of the acoustically perfect bends and away from the dog's weeping. There were thirty-six floors ahead. Twenty. He rested. Fifteen. He rested again.

When he reached Malone's floor, the alarms had not yet sounded. No one had discovered the bodies yet; the dog had not

barked. He found that his heart was beating insanely, thudding as if it were ready to burst wide open. There was some wild juice gurgling through him, something more than adrenalin, something unnameable. He was exhilarated, excited, frothing over with eagerness.

The hallways were heavily carpeted, producing no telltale echo of his footfalls. He passed by doors with name plates of very famous men on them. These were the apartments of Show executives, Show Performers. He had lived in one himself. He was familiar with all of it, though it seemed strange and different now. When he had been living here, he had come and gone without really looking. Now he was here illegally, a thief in the night. More correctly, a murderer in the night. Many things which had not impressed him before impressed him now. He made mental note of the width of the halls, calculating the possibility of fighting off two or more men—or of running from them. He moved on.

At Malone's door, there was a grid for voice identification of those who were permitted entrance easily and for those who wished to request entrance. Mike had Malone's voice. This would be the major test of that little piece of surgical chicanery. It sounded like Malone's voice. It had fooled the doorguard at the gate. But would it fool this semantic machine, this keen-eared little metal monster buried somewhere in the wall?

"Open please," he said self-consciously.

There was a hum. A click. The door buzzed without comment, revealing the interior of Malone's apartment. He stepped inside, ready to jerk the gas pistol into his palm. The room was empty and dark except for what moonlight trickled through the large plexi-glass windows set in the far wall. It was a large room, larger than his own living room had been when he had worked for Show. Slaved for Show. Draperies covered the part of the wall that was not window, black and red things shot through with a pale yellow psychedelic

sub-pattern. The other walls were chalk white and sported Spanish neo-mod paintings. They were all original oils. One appeared to be a Sanchez, and it almost caused Make to whistle out loud. There was a fortune hanging on the walls alone. There were two black leather couches, a recliner, three leather straight chairs, and a dozen scattered pillows of red and black. The entire room was bright yet dignified, invigorating yet respectable.

He moved quickly to the junction of living room and hallway. Stalking some imaginary animal, he went lightly down the carpeted corridor, pausing near the end of it to listen. There were voices ahead. One of them sounded faintly like his own.

Then the door of the end room abruptly opened. A man came out.

Mike caught his breath.

The man looked up, saw him.

Again, he was perceiving in the slow-motion fashion, watching as if from the sidelines while he moved. His arm rose in an arc, the palm stiffening, twisting sideways. The man, a servant judging by his white coat, white shirt, black bow tie, opened his mouth to scream. The hand with the steel wedge struck his neck; bone and cartilage broke, crackled sickeningly. Muscle and tendon tore, stretched. A small puff of air escaped the servant's lips in the form of a tiny squeak. The hand drew back. The body wobbled, fell forward into Jorgova's arms. He lowered it gently to the floor, careful not to make a sound, breathing through his nostrils instead of his mouth, slow and silent.

He stepped to the doorway, looked into the room. There was a desk, card-tape rack, player, everything needed for a complete home office. And there was a mirror image of himself, rather, of his new self. Tall, black hair, blue eyes, arrogant jutting of jaw and chin.

"Who are you?" the mirror said, holding a stack of card-tapes, halfway between desk and tape rack. He peered into the shadows, squinting.

"I—"

"What are you doing here?"

Mike stepped in from the shadows.

"Good God," the real Malone said, stepping back, stumbling. "Help!"

The gun was out of the leather pocket and in Mike's hand, spitting pellets. He aimed for the stomach, hoping to loll while spilling a small amount of blood. It was only a partial success.

Malone did an eerie death dance, dropping card-tapes as he went, twirling, sliding, finally collapsing against the desk, crashing onto the floor. But the pads and carpets were so thick that the crash was only a thud, dull and unexciting.

Mike approached the corpse, picked it up in his arms cradle-fashion to close the wound and keep the blood from dribbling on the rug. He struggled with the burden into the hallway, opened the disposal chute that was disguised as a large, gold, ornate shield. In a few moments, he had worked the big man's body through, let it drop. There was a distant roar of constantly consuming flames; there was a crunch, a loud sizzling as of meat cooking, then just the roar again. He shoved the servant's body through too, closed the door, and went back into Malone's private office. He had a bit of cleaning up to do.

He sat down at the desk a moment to allow his senses to begin perceiving at a normal speed again and to still the awful pounding of his heart. The phone rang. And rang again.

He stared at it, reached for it, withdrew his hand.

It rang a third time.

With a surge of consciously exerted confidence, he answered it.

"Do you have it, Malone?"

He recognized the voice. It was Cockley, the same voice of the same man who had nearly strangled him that day long ago when he had refused to bare the basics of his soul for public consumption. Fear roiled over fear in his mind, terror over terror. He clutched at his nerve with a shaky will power, forced courage into his heart. Knowing a great delay in answering would arouse suspicion, he finally said, "Almost have it, Mr. Cockley."

"Well how long will it take, man?"

"Another hour."

"I want that information before you go to bed tonight, Malone. I have confidence in you. Don't ruin that confidence."

"No, sir."

"I want the operation started tonight. I want Nimron!"

"I'll call you in an hour, Mr. Cockley."

"No," Cockley said. "I'll call you—in forty-five minutes. Keep moving, Malone."

There was a click. He sat for a moment with the phone in his hand, staring into it as if Cockley were lurking in the plastic mouthpiece, watching him. Then the old man's last words slipped into Mike's awareness, jolted him from reverie. Forty-five minutes. And he did not even know what it was he was supposed to have ready for Cockley.

His heart began pounding again: a thunder boom.

Suddenly his head was aching and his knees were trembling. He was abruptly hungry though he had eaten, sleepy though he had slept. A thousand reasons why he should chuck it and run whirled through his mind. But the one reason why he should not, why he should stay and fight, was blue-eyed, blonde, and stronger than the other thousand put together.

He forced himself to breathe deeply as Pierre had shown him, to conquer the outward manifestations of»his fear. Outwardly efficient but inwardly boiling, he looked about the office. The card-tapes that Malone had been carrying toward the desk were strewn like dead gulls across the beach of the carpet. The card-tapes! Perhaps they contained the information Cockley wanted. Malone must have been expecting the phone call, must have been getting them ready to transmit over the phone. He gathered them up, slipped them into the player, started it. Malone's voice spoke to him through the wire mouth yawning on the top of the desk. "There are six Presidential vacation areas and four bomb shelters. These tapes contain all the information I could locate from the written files. They are a distillation of what the mechanical translator reports the ancient books have to say. Each of the following cards is concerned with a different location, arranged in order of probability."

There was a snap as the machine flipped to the next card. The fourth card, the third location, was the correct one. If Cockley received this and began the search tonight, Nimron and the others would be cornered by morning. He could not allow that. He took the cards out of the player, tore the first one up, the third one into fine bits. Slipping a fresh, unrecorded card into the dictocord machine on the desk, he began speaking into the mike grid. He would say there were only three bomb shelters and leave the rest of the report alone. Cockley would get nine locations instead of ten. Nimmy and the others would be safe. He had made it just in time.

Forty minutes after the first call, the phone rang again.

He did not hesitate this time. "Hello?"

"Malone, do you have it?"

"Yes, Mr. Cockley. If you will put blanks in your dictacorder, plug it into the phone, I'll transmit them at high speed."

There was a moment's pause. "Go ahead."

He slipped the altered report into the player, flipped it to top speed and leaned back in his chair. In ten minutes, the process was completed. "That's it," he said to Cockley.

The old man was in a better mood now. "Boy, if this works, I'll consider a stock bonus for you. Two hundred shares in Coolcola."

"Why, thank you, sir. Thank you very much."

"I'll let you know when we catch them," Cockley said confidently. "Now get some sleep."

And he did.

Chapter Two

He woke to the alarm at eight o'clock sharp. He had listened to Malone's schedule tape and knew that he was not to go to the Show studios until ten. He rose, checked the wall freezer while his eyes were still partially matted, rooted up some synthe-bacon, a few real eggs, and a can of juice. Gobbling the cooked results, chewing and swallowing until his stomach had stopped the dragon protest it had set up, he thought about his next step. He would have to shower and get dressed, then somehow get to see Lisa before he left the building. The plan called for a short contact this morning to ready her for the escape that night. He would have to convince her that he was Mike, that he wanted to help her, that she should cooperate. It might not be so very easy, considering he looked nothing like the Mike she knew. He finished eating and went to the shower.

Later, he stepped into the hall, letting the door of the apartment hum shut behind. He walked down the hall, punched for the elevator. When it arrived, he was confronted by a small young man with a pale and undernourished face. His teeth were yellow next to his gums. His uniform was just a bit too large.

"Top floor, please."

The boy pulled down on the lever, sending the lift in a smooth upward rush. "Hear about the excitement, Mr. Malone?" There was no particular trace of fear or respect in his voice.

"Excitement?"

"Murder. Three bodies found between the third and second floors."

"Whose bodies?" he asked, innocent to the world.

"Mr. Conan, first of all. Lives here, a minor exec. And two unknowns. Very mysterious, wouldn't you say, Mr. Malone? The police can't make tops nor bottoms of it."

The elevator jerked to a halt.

He handed the boy a five dollar bill, in keeping with Malone's conceited, self-important manner. "And make the ride smoother next time!" he snapped, stepping out onto Lisa's floor.

Lisa's floor. The sound of it pleased him. *Lisa*. He was going to be seeing her once more, looking down into those sky eyes and those apple lips. He wondered how he would react. Could he stand detached as he could while fighting, watching and evaluating his reactions to her, to what she said and did? He doubted it. He thought he would act rather irrationally and immaturely. And he did not really give a damn!

He asked the grid for admittance.

"Yes?" a voice asked overhead.

"Jake Malone to see Miss Monvasa."

There was a pause while the central computer checked his voice against the recording it had of Malone's voice. Apparently approving, it activated the door.

And she was standing there. Hair like sunshine, lips like roses. All the cliches and then some. He knew for certain and more than ever that he loved her. It was not just the association with her on Show. It was very definitely something more basic, warmer, something unexplainable. "Come in, Mr. Malone," she said with her wind-in-the-willows voice.

"I just want," he said, stepping through the doorway, "to pay my regards, Miss Monvasa. I have just recently been moved into this tower through a promotion. I have always admired your work, and this was my first opportunity to tell you so."

There was a distinct pattern of distaste on her face, features contorted. It alarmed him until he realized she was showing contempt for Jake Malone and what he had said, not for Mike Jorgova and what he thought. But he could not voice his own thoughts, not here in a room with electronic ears. Her rooms might be on instant snoop or delayed snoop, with her words not heard for a week. But he had no way of knowing which, and he assumed an instant snoop was in progress. One had to live in the world of Show with the knowledge that every word might be overheard. He had to get her into the hallway. But first, some small talk.

"I find it a shame," he said, "that you no longer hold one of the leading roles."

"I find it restful!" she snapped back.

She was wearing red leotards and a red top: crimson lady. A cinnabar duchess. Her hair flashed wildly in contrast.

"Oh, I guess so. The day-to-day routine would get tiring."

"To say the least." She picked up a drink, sipped it without offering him one. In fact, she had yet to offer him a seat.

God, he thought. He had never seen her cutting, sarcastic like this. She had always been rather meek when speaking with anyone but himself. She was dissatisfied, and she let it be known. It made him feel good. She would be willing to run.

"Perhaps when one of the current Performers matures, you can be brought back into the script."

"I sincerely hope not."

"But you'd be a major star again. You'd have a leading man."

"I have a leading man at the moment," she said, looking to the black dots of the microphones. "He is more than enough, thank you. He is more than enough—to endure."

His mind spun madly. She had a leading man? What was that supposed to mean? It had been aimed directly at the microphones; she had spoken the last few words especially loud. Stopping his frantic thoughts before they whirled him into actions he could not afford, he decided it was time to get her into the hall so that they might speak without fear of being overhead. "I think our roof is leaking," he said, trying to sound as sincere as possible.

She turned to look at him directly for the first time. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

He flushed. "Nothing obtuse. I meant that the snow seems to be melting and leaking through the roof. There is a water stain in the ceiling of the hallway. Look here." He stepped into the hall, motioned to her.

"Water stains interest only contractors and psychiatrists."

"No. Look here," he said. "See if I'm imagining things."

She sighed and walked into the hall. "Where?"

His heart skipped a beat, hit one, skipped another. "I'm Mike," he said quietly, steadily.

"What?"

"Mike Jorgova. I have had plastic surgery, a voice change, blood index altering. The real Malone is dead. I—killed him."

Her eyes flashed anger, deep and black. She stared a moment longer, and she allowed her eye to soften as she found no hint of a betrayal in the words he had spoken. "You're trying to trick me," she said unsurely.

"Lisa, please listen and try to understand. I *am* Mike. I have come back to get you out of here. I must have your cooperation fast!"

"Even if you are telling the truth, how could you free me?"

"Tonight, in the basement garage, there will be a floater and a driver waiting. The floater is one of ours; a switch will be pulled this afternoon in a Show parking area in another part of the city. The driver will be in the trunk when the floater is parked; he will let himself out and be ready for us."

She wanted to believe him. He could see that written clearly in the wrinkles of exasperation at the corners of her eyes, in the furrows of her troubled forehead. "I'll have a— guest tonight," she said.

"Who?"

"Anaxemander Cockley."

He choked. Things rapidly swirled into clarity within his mind. "Your—leading man?"

"Yes." Her voice was tiny again, the voice of the old Lisa.

"I'll kill him!"

"I won't stop you."

He was breathing hard. "I'll come tonight at midnight. Leave your doors slightly ajar."

"We would be in bed then," she said bitterly, the words coming between her lips almost as steam gushing from a pipe.

His eyes stung. He clenched his fists. "Midnight. I'll kill him." It was no longer an explanation; it was an oath.

"You *are* Mike," she said, running her hand over his face, letting the fingers linger at his lips and eyes.

"You had better get inside. We don't want to arouse their suspicions."

She stepped back into the living room, raising her voice to be sure the mikes caught it all, every phony word. "The whole damn roof can cave in for all I care. All the snow in the world could leak through, Mr. Malone, and I would not give one little damn." The door slid shut to her command. But she smiled at him before she was gone from sight.

He turned, found the elevator, and went down, the boy chirping in his ear about all the police in the lobby. When the doors opened, he stepped into the large, busy room where uniformed men scurried about, operating strange and ominous detection machines looking for a trace of anything —odor, powder, old chewing gum. He had taken only a few steps when the dog ran from behind a couch, snipping at his ankles and snarling.

He tried to move.

The dog would not let him. It was the tenant's dog, the dog on the stairs.

"Hey!" a policeman shouted, kicking at the dog. "Get away from there!"

The dog gave ground reluctantly, its teeth still bared, its throat still bubbling with anger.

"Thank you," Mike said, fighting to stop the trembling in his hands.

"That's okay, Mr. Malone. His owner was killed last evening here on the stairs. Suppose you heard about it?"

"Yes. Just now in the elevator."

"Messy. Certainly was messy. Blood and parts of people all over the place."

"Any clues?" he asked.

"None yet. Thought about turning the dog loose to see if he could turn up anything, but his going for you sort of rules out his reliability, don't it?"

"Unless I've taken to killing in my sleep," Mike answered.

The policeman laughed. "I think it was a shoot-out and that all parties were killed," he said a moment later, growing serious again. "The chief didn't agree at first, but even he's coming around now. This tenant met these two strangers coming into the building for God knows what reason and they drew a gun on him. He fired back, a little faster, but got his future eaten too."

Mike was about to answer when someone announced that the doorguard's body had been found in heavy shrubs. The lobby cleared fast as police and machines sped outside to the corpse.

He walked after them, rounded the group, and slipped Malone's carcheck into a slot on a gray utility post. He had salvaged all the cards before dumping the body down the incinerator, and now he was glad he had had the presence of mind to think of a detail like that. The card popped back up. A moment later, a green and gray floater came up through the elevator platform. He opened the door, climbed in, flipped on the air system. The car rose shakily, then held

steady. Evidently, driving outward from the tower did not activate the alarm. He had never thought of that when living in the building, but now it meant something to him. It would be important later that night. Turning the wheel, he pulled onto the drive, shifted to a higher speed, and flirted toward the studios, a day of weaving through Malone's chores without revealing himself, and Cockley.

It was going to snow again. The sky was gray, low and even in texture. Somewhere above lay winter. Even while Nature commanded his thoughts, a snowflake hit the windscreen. A second. Moments later, a third.

Chapter Three

The machines auto-parked his floater. He entered the studios through the executive door with his stolen card credentials, walked down the long corridor to the hub of the studios which was as the core of an apple—the meat being the various sets and offices of lesser officials. He rose to his own office—Malone's off ice—where a dozen people scurried about. A girl in a see-through blouse with excellent reasons for wearing it wiggled-slid across the floor toward him.

"Mr. Malone," she began, batting fake eyelashes and smiling. Her perfect teeth were false too. Mike speculated that her blue eyes were probably brown beneath the hue-altering contacts she wore. Indeed, there was only one thing about her that was real. And that was very real indeed.

"Yes?"

"Mr. Cockley says to send you up to his office the moment you come in. He says the *very* moment you come in!"

"Thank you," he said. He did not call her by name, for he did not know her name.

"Are you getting promoted again?"

"I doubt it," he said. "This is the highest office in Show, aside from Mr. Cockley's."

She opened her mouth to say something more, but he turned on his heel—a very military turn—and exited the way he had just entered. There was more on his mind than the staffs interpretation

of what Cockley meant by the summons. He was worried. If Cockley had checked all those false leads and found none of them valuable, what would his reaction be? It would most certainly not be jovial. And what would he do to Malone? Obviously, Connie had been done away with. Would Malone be the next to go?

All those thoughts, all those questions were still slithering through his mind when the doors to Cockley's office parted and he stepped through them. This was more than an office, really. It was the nerve center of a world. It was here that decisions were made, policies designed and carried out that would affect the entire planet. And all of them made by this one man. There was a set of Show aura projectors sitting in the corner, the deluxe I-Have-It model of synthe-teak and hand-tooled leather. On the wall were Tri-D paint glowers. One was a winter scene with a pond of glittering blue ice set before an old house whose chimney belched flame-spotted smoke into the cold air, and children skating. There was a tropical scene of naked women and waterfalls; and there was an ocean scene. The waves in the latter actually foamed and rolled. And there was a desk. And behind the desk was Anaxemander Cockley, the man starting on his third century of life, the man with the million year old eyes.

"Come in, Jake," Cockley said warmly.

He decided the tone of voice could be a ploy, an attempt to throw him off balance for the attack to come.

"Sit down."

He chose the chair to the side of the desk. He knew the old man could still leap a desk faster than he could get out of the way. The seat directly before the massive work area, then, was a cannibal's pot which he did not care to climb into.

"You are a very efficient young man."

"Thank you, sir."

"And you could go far."

"Thank you again."

It was all too nicey-nice. It had to end. It did. "But you *won't* go far with performances like this!" And Cockley threw the card-tapes across the desk. They fluttered to the floor.

His mind was screaming! He felt like there were ponderous mythological animals, flabby and crude, weighting him down in a river he was trying to cross. The river had no bottom. He struggled to breathe and to clear his jumbled thoughts. How would Malone react in this situation? Malone, he thought, would have remained cool. He would have controlled his nerves. He would not have pandered too much. Finally, he said, "None of them helped?"

"You're damn right none of them helped!" Cockley shouted, his face coloring purple—a shade meant to cast fear into the mind of the beholder. It did.

"Do you want me to go back through the files again, sir?"

The old man was burning with rage. Perhaps he was being just a bit too cool, not pandering enough. He decided on a humbler approach and said, "I'll do it all myself. I'll recheck every fact the translator gave me."

"You do just that."

"When would you like it, sir?" He could see the color seeping out of Cockley's face. "By this evening, I could—"

"You have it by the time I am ready to leave today. By four o'clock, five hours from now. Understand?"

"Yes, sir," he said, standing. "I'll get right on it."

"I would if I were you."

Mike stepped into the hall, stood facing the ancient bastard as the doors slid shut between them, then hurried to his office.

Inside, Cockley sat at the desk a moment, motionless except for the constant clenching and unclenching of his fists. After a time, he reached across the desk, flipped on the speaker grid. "Computer bank. I want to have a check run on some recent research. I want, word for word, all the information Jake Malone collected on Presidential hideaways from the ancient written files. *Word for word*."

The computer answered affirmatively in its tube/circuit/wire/voice.

***

I just thought of it! Who is I? Zombie. I just realized the pattern. Remember the Village-Society-Village-Gestalt thing? Well, there is a natural end. Where do we all come from? God, of course. If you aren't deity-oriented, perhaps you say Prime Mover. If you are a complete cynic, maybe you say Chance. Anyway, we all come from this Supreme Force. We enter the world, and we are a single entity, responsible unto ourselves. We are, essentially, cavemen. And then we form cavemen unions that we call villages, and I am given life. Then, as chronicled earlier, Village becomes Society. Society becomes Village again through electronic media. Show comes along and warps the village into a household; the many are few. Performers are the world. We shrink back toward the caveman. If there is ever a single, great star of Show, the world will become one individual again. And to complete the cycle, that individual will, somehow, be uncreated and turned into Superior Force again. See? Which brings up several interesting questions, baby. First, is God

merely a collected awareness of many individuals not yet created? Secondly, is God any the less superhuman because he is only an amalgam of flawed parts? Thirdly, do we really want to revert and become God again? To give up our individual identities, see? To crawl back and back and back… Getting chilly in here, isn't it? Maybe you better hit the heat button. Maybe you better change the subject…

Chapter Four

Mike was perspiring. After the encounter with Cockley, he felt that he had a right to sweat. He wiped it from his forehead, his chin and neck. Slouching even further into the deep folds of his heavily-padded swallow-all swivel chair, he shuddered. The computer was digging up everything it could. If he could hand Cockley enough to keep him busy for the next several hours, he would be safe. Just enough to keep them guessing until midnight. Even if the last several tips were wild as all hell, they would distract the investigators long enough for him to grab Lisa and run for it.

The computer beeped, and a card-tape popped out of the slot. He immediately slipped it into the player, listened intently. Presidents had been known for their restful retreats in the past; they had them spread all over the country. Most of them were known today. That was the problem. For instance, neither Cockley nor his investigators would believe the Revolutionaries were hiding out in Hyannis Port, not after a history of three Presidents permeated the place. But they might just believe that a certain Texas ranch, now parceled up and all but forgotten, held a secret shelter. He could keep a crew of investigators tied up all night on that one. It was just romantic enough to sound like a good lead—a secret shelter with a secret entrance which had never been set down in words. The latest card-tape finished. There was nothing worthwhile on it, nothing like the ranch story. He tore it up, threw it in a waste slot, and demanded better data, more thorough checks and crosschecks by the computer.

While he waited, he ruminated on the entity that was dredging up all these facts for all these cards. It was rumored that the computer extended beneath the entire city, miles deep and miles

square. But no one ever elaborated on the rumors. No one found it fascinating. Machines had long ago ceased to fascinate anyone. Machines were too reliable, too sure, too perfect to fascinate. It was like the dawn: you hardly notice it because It never fails to happen. And machines never failed. Still, the concept of such a vast set of wires and tubes and memory cells excited him. Perhaps it stemmed from some of the old books he had been taught to read. He remembered a story about a computer that went insane and took over the world. That made machines more fun, more interesting. They had more personality if one could fear them. Previously, machines and computers had been great, gray things of mist-matter indistinguishable from walls and streets and other gray things. Now they held wonder for him.

There was a bleep, but no new card flopped out to be heard. Mike peered up into the slot, stuck a finger in and felt around before he realized the noise was coming from the phone. He picked it up. "Hello?"

"Cockley here, Jake. I think we have something important. Could you come up right away?"

"Certainly, sir."

"And don't worry about those new reports. Junk them."

"Yes, sir."

Click.

He stood, sat down again. Had Cockley really found something? How? Were they now rounding up Nimron, Pierre, and the others, closing the Appalachian shelter? But how could they have found out? Abruptly, he decided it was not advisable to sit and work himself into a frenzy about things which might not even be happening. He stood, left his office, and went upstairs to see Cockley.

***

Konrad Giver was.

He was not.

He was.

Fighting something he did not understand, Konrad Giver slid up and down coils of light, slithered through purple rings of fire into ocher light.

Orange . . .

Green pyramids…

Trees of black with red and gold leaves …

He was. Was not. Was again.

There was not even the sensation of being part of the Performer. There was a flickering of feeling when he knew he was within his own body and the blankness of all but sight when he was in the other place—the totally alien place.

He managed to overcome his panic and tried to ascertain, logically, his whereabouts. But there was no logic to it. He had slipped into his chair, turned on the aura. Minutes later, he had lost control of his mind. He went beyond the mind of the Performer into a land of light and shapes of light. Some of the colors were beyond his limited vocabulary to describe even to himself. Still, he could not pull himself back into his body long enough to switch off the aura.

And that was the nightmare.

He thought of the Empathists.

But that took days, not minutes!

Colors exploded around him! Suddenly he could not sense his body at all. He was completely divorced from it. He was sliding up, up, up and over the edge of a chrome yellow strip into a copper sea streaked with silver. And now there were voices all about him, babbling and moaning and weeping as bodies in Purgatory…

***

"Would you like a drink?" Cockley asked.

Mike had expected to get right down to business. It irked him to put it off, but he realized that the old man's whims were his commands. "Yes thank you."

"A bit of synthe-scotch and a bit of the real stuff. Synthe is actually better than the real thing, you know."

"I didn't."

"It is. Much better. No chance of hitting a bad batch. No worries about a too tangy strain. No contamination. Always perfect and always with that bittersweet quality that makes it so distinctive." He shook the golden mixer bottle vigorously. "Would you bring me three glasses?"

Mike did as told. "Who is the third for?"

Cockley talked as he poured. "One for you… one for me. Would you please take that chair there by the desk, Jake?" He set the mixer bottle down. Taking a handkerchief from his pocket, he gently lifted the empty glass, carried it to the doorway. A messenger appeared, took the glass, holding it by the cloth-covered portion, and disappeared. Cockley turned, took his drink and sank into his swivel chair, sighing heavily. "Do you know what fingerprints are, Jake?"

There was something ominous in that phrase. He searched the corners of his mind; he looked at his fingers. But there was no answer he could find. "No, sir," he said at length.

"Look very closely at the tips of your fingers," Cockley advised.

Cockley was being too conversational, too friendly. He had better be sharp and aware, ready to jump. He looked, meantime, at his fingertips.

"Notice the whorls."

He looked closely. All sorts of fine lines swirled, nearly parallel to one another, looping over the ball of his finger, curling down again.

"Fingerprints," Cockley said.

He failed, still, to see the importance.

"No man's fingerprints are the same as another man's, Jake. Long ago, in pre-Show days, the police used fingerprinting as their chief means of identification. It was a very valuable aid in crime-fighting. When you touch anything, you leave a pattern—your fingerprints. Dusting the surface you touch brings these out. You touched the scotch glass…"

Mike was beginning to get the implications, and he did not like what was shaping up.

"Fingerprinting died out long ago. No one even remembers it anymore. It came to my attention a dozen years ago as the sidelight of an investigation into the written records. In this day and age, when surgery can wipe off a man's face and put a new one on, change his blood and his retina pattern, this might be a good thing to know about, this fingerprinting. If the surgeon did not know of such a thing, then he could not think to change the prints of a patient. I now have a file on every employee, with fingerprints for

each. Fingerprinting is a form of reading, and no one reads now—except my translator machines. And now they can tell me whether your prints match those of the Jake Malone we printed a day or so ago."

"But I *am* Jake Malone," he said, forcing confusion into his voice though he was no longer confused—just frightened.

"Of course you are. At least, I hope you are. But explain this. I had the computer repeat all the info it had gathered for you. It was time consuming, but I eventually found something important—quite important—that you had left out. The Appalachian shelter."

Mike remained expressionless.

"If you are not Jake Malone, you are very adept at imitating his calm."

"I am Malone," Mike said evenly.

"Anyway, Malone is an apple polisher and a hard worker. It was not like him to leave anything out of the report that might possibly lead to a successful mission. Now, maybe this is just a mistake on your, Malone's, part. However, the computer informed me of the fact that Jake had drawn up two sets of card-tapes. And the one set was a card shorter than the other, lacking the Appalachian shelter card. Jake had listed it, then dropped it. And Jake had also attempted to wipe it from the computer's memory. Someone had tried it, anyway. Someone, in Jake's name, told the computer to destroy its memory cells relating to the shelter. And the computer did. But there are other things besides memory cells. The master computer beneath this city not only remembers everything it researches, but it also has a tape-file where it records all key phrases which help it to activate the correct memory cells when necessary. Appalachian Presidential Bomb Shelter was the key phrase in this report. All the little facts, in other words, have been erased, leaving only the skeleton. We do not know where the shelter may be, but with its approximate location,

we have been able to set the computer on a second search of the written records. It should find the material in the same time it found it for Jake Malone. Tomorrow morning, we should know where the Revolutionaries are hiding."

"If I'm not Jake Malone. But I am."

"You may be." But his tone said *You are not*.

"I decided the Appalachian shelter was a false lead."

"Why go to the extreme of blotting it completely from the computer's memory? Why not just tear up the card?"

"I thought erasure was standard procedure."

"Did you always erase what you didn't need when yon were head of Research?"

He had blundered. He could only try to enforce that blunder now. "Yes."

"We'll see," Cockley said. He smiled. But it was not really a smile, not really a smile at all.

Mike sat wrapped in silence. He sipped the drink once, but his mouth was too dry and the alcohol burned too harshly against his fear-parched lips and gums. He found himself staring into the tropical Tri-D window, hardly thinking, nearly numb. He was slipping into the refuge of reverie now when he most needed to plan his actions. Certainly, when his fingerprints were examined, it would be found that he was not Jake Malone. He had to think. There were only minutes left.

Less than minutes.

The door buzzed.

Cockley called it open; it slid back on oiled feet.

The messenger entered, whispered something to the old man, departed. Cockley turned to stare at Mike. "Who are you?"

"Jake Malone."

There was no longer anything but hatred and anger in Cockley's voice. "I said, *Who are you*?"

"Jake Malone, damnit! Your bloody fingerprints are wrong!" His only chance was to bluff even harder.

"You might as well tell me. You're as good as dead anyway."

"Bastard," he hissed, thinking of Lisa and wondering what she would think and how she would feel when Cockley was there at midnight but he was not.

There was a fire consuming everything in Cockley's eyes, raging behind them.

The door buzzed again, interrupting them. The same messenger delivered a card-tape from the labs. Cockley accepted it, waited until the employee had left, then popped it into the player. "Human remains—skeletal fragments, hair, and flesh particles—found in Cockley Towers Number Two/ incinerator shaft leading from Malone apartment." It ceased its echoing indictment.

"*That's* the real Jake Malone," Cockley snapped. "Bone fragments and scraps of charred flesh. Nothing more. You killed one of my best men!"

"And there will be more," he said, suddenly reckless now that there was no escape.

The remark incensed Cockley even more. He tried to control himself. The doctors said that was his major personality problem—his quick temper, his inability to control his basest emotions. He argued that it was something he must have gained from one of the operations, from one of the parts of someone else's body. Another man's eyes, he argued, might shift his perception of the world. They said, politely, that his reasoning was very unscientific. But they did not really argue; they did not dare. And now the anger was rushing up in him, boiling closer and closer to the critical point, when he would do something irrational. He knew it, but he could not stop it. This man had killed Jake Malone. He should hold him for interrogation, but there was a surging, crying need for something more than interrogation, something a great deal more violent than the asking of questions.

Mike backed around the chair he had been sitting in. His fear was great. His mind was filled with half-pictures of his only other encounter with this old man, pictures of a long ago struggle in which he had been the loser. Cockley leaped with surprising agility, even swifter than Mike remembered. Nevertheless, Mike had time to grab the chair, thrust out with it. Cockley grabbed the legs. They muscled each other for a moment. Mike vaguely remembered a lesson with Pierre and the words "Never muscle a man stronger than you are. Run and dodge until he leaves himself open." But by then, the chair was out of his hands, raised and crashing down against his shoulder. Stars exploded in his head, winked out.

Everything winked out. There was darkness.

Chapter Five

A dragon growled at him. The dragon of consciousness.

His head was roaring with pain, belching fire clouds of agony that permeated his thoughts, flickered, flashed, fumed, burned. His head was an aching, water-filled blister on his shoulders. He tried to ignore the dragon, but its breath lit the night more and more…

He opened his eyes. Part black and part light, the room swirled madly for a moment. Before he could straighten things out, he felt hands on him, felt himself being moved, carried. He coughed. Suddenly he was being thrust through an opening into a narrow place where the air was hot and heavy against his face. Then the hands were off him.

He was falling!

Cockley's laugh echoed from above, hollow and ugly.

Falling…

He was falling into the incinerator! He screamed; it came out as a thick gurgle. Lashing out with hands and feet, smashing violently against the walls, he grasped for something to hold to. His fingers flashed past rungs. Rungs… Rungs… He grabbed at them, caught one after several tries, almost jerked his arm from its socket when his fall was so abruptly cut short. He hung from that single rung, two dozen yards above the glowing grill where fire licked through in eager tongues.

Cockley had sentenced him to death by fire. It would have taken him several minutes to die on the grill. Several horrible

minutes. The workmen's rungs stopped twenty feet from the bottom. With the fire biting at him with acid teeth, he would not have been able to jump for them, to even try to climb out.

Perspiration dripping from his head, his armpits, he reached up with his free arm and found the rung. Searching with his feet, he found the lower rung, braced his feet in it and leaned against the wall, heaving out a great quantity of air held tightly in his lungs through the entire maneuver. The dragon wanted to sleep. Blackness lurked in the background, anxious and ready to envelop him. But he had to fight it off. If he could not cling to consciousness, he would fall.

Below, the fire crackled red…

Yellow and orange…

The heat swept up in visible waves, washed over him, grew chillier as it rose. Somewhere above there was coolness—and a door out.

Crimson flickering…

Yellow ...

He clutched at the rung, reached up with one hand, found the next. It was warm to his touch. It seemed as if every drop of his vital resources had been leaked through his pores. But, forcing himself onward, he found more liquid—the waters of hope and revenge. They sustained him. He rose from the hot place to the place of coolness.

Rung by rung, there were visions with him. Sometimes there was a laughing girl. Sometimes, a very old man. But the old man wore a false face. Then the old man became a wolf; the false face became the mask of a sheep. Then the girl with the sky eyes and

sun hair… At times, both phantoms were blended grotesquely, superimposed on each other like bad photographs.

Still he climbed. Step by step from the hot to the cool. There, at the top, he rested and lauded himself. There was a blunt, featureless cement ceiling above with only a minor air shaft the width of two fingers breaking its smooth facade. In the shadows and darknesses around him, he saw lesser darknesses which were the recesses of the rungs and the hatch which led into Cockley's office. The hatch recess was deep. By perching on it, and propping his feet against the rungs on the opposite wall, he could sit bent up in the quiet with only the roaring of the fire and wait for the office to empty. He could afford to wait. Moments ago, he had only seconds left of life. Now he might have years. All of it would be borrowed time. Two or three hours was as nothing to him.

Meanwhile, the world went on…

***

It was all so public. There were hospital men in white, emergency squad men in red. There was a fire truck and an ambulance. And they were not going to need any of those things. There was no patient for the hospital men, no fire for the fighters of blazes. Their truck could pour no water. The ambulance would go back slow—and mute.

But they would need the funeral director and the doctor who was filling out the notice of death.

He sighed. He would not miss her. Their marriage had been a flop. She was only someone to sit next to for Show programs, an extra mouth to feed.

The rotting corpse was lifted out of the chair. The chunks of brown, thick, bloated flesh that stuck to the arms and seat were

sluiced loose with alcohol. The seat was sterilized. Already, the air purifier had dissipated the stench.

He had gone away for two weeks.

He had hoped she would go Empathist, and she had.

He watched, nodded sadly as they covered her and carried her out.

It was snowing again.

The fire truck left. The ambulance drove away with its useless burden. The house was empty, except for him—and the aura. He wondered, briefly, what it would be like to spread out under her aura and *his. But considering the space between the two machines, that was a physical impossibility. He would have to be content with one*.

The rooms were dark.

The aura came on to his touch—oil dropped on water. A rainbow of slippery, shimmering color.

He thought he heard her screaming at him as Show flooded his senses. But that was impossible, for she was dead. He had seen her molding meat.

Still, in the distant background, there was a cry.

In fact, there were a great, great many cries…

***

As Mike waited, he thought of Lisa. She had become his only goal now. Even the Revolution he had been trained for seemed like a dream of sorts, unreal. The sessions with Pierre were almost parts of someone else's life. The conversations with Roger Nimron were dreamlike too. All the talk of mass media, expression changed by

method of expression, all of it was mumbo-jumbo in his mind. There was one burning thing: Lisa.

Finally, he could wait no longer. There was much to do. Some of his strength—if not his energy—was returning, and it urged him to action. Cautiously, he pushed upon the hatch. It was a magnetic-close panel that opened easily from either side. It swung outward into a dark room. He breathed another sigh of relief and clambered out. He walked to Cockley's desk, fell into the chair. He ordered a compact but nourishing meal from the auto-serve and had time to wipe the worst of the perspiration and soot from his hands onto his trousers before the food popped out of the delivery slot. It was mostly carbohydrate capsules but there was also a synthe-ham sandwich for bulk and a real cup of real coffee. He laced the fragrant brew with a shot of scotch from the bar. The burning sensation as it gurgled down his throat was pleasant. He felt, almost, like a new man.

The clock said it was seven when he asked it the time. There were five hours left until he would have to be at Cockley Towers to get Lisa—and to kill the old man. He set the alarm for four hours and curled up on the plasti-leather couch to sleep. He would have to be as refreshed as possible. Anaxemander Cockley would not be an easy man to overcome, let alone an easy man to kill.

When he woke to the alarm, he felt refreshed and capable once again. There was an hour remaining until midnight, enough time to reach the tower, kill Cockley, and rescue Lisa with a bit of a safety margin thrown in. He stood, stretched his arms and neck, and checked himself. He was dirty, but he could not bathe now. His clothes were torn, but he had no thread. Slicking his hair back with one hand, he checked the gas pistol with the other. The vibra-pistol was missing, but Cockley had evidently overlooked the smaller and deadlier device. He jerked his arm down, smiled as it slammed into his palm. It still worked. Tucking it back into its smooth pouch, he walked to the desk. He had remembered that the computer was

researching the Appalachian shelter, and he thought he might destroy its efforts. He was only able, however, to order it to stop researching where it was. Cockley had inserted a block that prevented erasure of already gleaned facts. He would have to be satisfied with setting them back a few hours instead of stopping the hunt altogether. Besides, it was time to stop playing with mechanical gadgets; it was time to leave.

The hall was empty, lighted only by a faint bulb at each end. He turned to the left, found the stairs down. The lobby was vacant, as were the streets.

He walked the streets, for the floaters were in the garage where there might be an attendant. And he had no floater, after all, now that he was supposed to be dead. He wondered what Cockley's expression would be when he walked into the bedroom, when he tore the old pig's guts out with a gas pellet. However, he reasoned, it would be foolish to let Cockley see him at all. It would be safer and surer to shoot the man in the back if necessary. Not very heroic, but the only safe and positive way. He turned his thoughts from the victim and the killing to thoughts of the night. Pierre had taught him never to think about the battles to come, but to prepare for those battles through tranquility. The night was tranquil enough, certainly. Light snow drifted down, fine and cold. If it kept on for any length of time, there would be great white blankets spreading over everything again, covering up the mud and the gray ice. Already, the trees were rimed, the grass an old woman's mane of hair. The streets were wet, glistening. The yellow and blue streetlamps were reflected sharply in the macadam.

The wind was sweet.

The snow struck his face, matted on his eyelashes and turned to water, blurring his vision now and then.

In time, he came to Cockley Towers. He stood by the gate to Lisa's tower, looking in at the lobby and the door-guard. He fished Malone's cards from his pocket, cards Cockley had not taken off him, and plunged the card-key into the lock. The gate swung open. He had been afraid that Malone's combination might have been removed from the lock's brain, but it evidently had not been. He continued up the shrub-bordered path toward the large double doors. The doorguard met him, pulled the heavy panel wide to let him in.

"Why, Mr. Malone, you look awful," the man said.

"Slipped and fell on the street."

"You walked?" the guard asked, his muscled jaws writhing with each word.

"I said I slipped, didn't I? You don't slip and fall in a floater!"

"Sorry, Mr. Malone. Sure. You want any help getting upstairs?"

"Only my clothes were damaged," he growled.

The big man stared after him as he crossed the lobby, punched for the elevator. There was a different boy on duty. He was quiet, gloomy, gnawing on a wad of gum. There was no conversation this time, only the sideways glances from the oiled eyes of the boy as he pondered Mike's dirtied, rent garments. He stepped out at Lisa's floor, walked down the dimly lighted corridor to the door that was hers.

She had left it very slightly open. Inside, the living room was dark, as was the hallway. There was a faint odor of jasmine in the air, her perfume. He could imagine the faint and noxious odor of something else—of Cockley. Hate seethed into his head, into every inch of his body, his fingertips full of as much loathing as the very cells of his brain. Pierre had told him that it was best to develop a

hatred of the enemy, making it that much easier to kill when necessary. But this hatred was not an application of one of Pierre's lessons. It was natural; it was the pure product of his own mind. He hated Cockley for the years he had been trapped in Show, for the first beating years ago, for the attempted murder in the incinerator, and—most awful and most of all—for what he had done to Lisa, for what he had made of her. He had taken the only thing that really meant anything to Mike and had used it in whatever manner he chose, deflowering it literally and figuratively. Mike stood before the bedroom door, letting this hatred boil. It mounted from a fog into a cloud— into a cloud sculpture of many eyes, fangs, and wicked claws.

Gently, when the time had come, he slid back the bedroom door, which also stood slightly open. It moved noiselessly on lubricated runners, disappearing into the wall. He stood very still, hardly daring to breathe. And he listened. A rustling of sheets, very faint and very light. Breathing…

Two kinds of breathing: one light and one heavy; one easy, one rattling in and out of large lungs…

He stood and allowed the sculpture to gain in feature and stature, waiting as it filled his mind with its own hateful form.

Finally, he reached around the corner of the half-open doorway and flipped on the lights. Brilliance seeped into every corner of the room, washed back on him like a rising sun. Cockley had jumped from the bed, naked and snarling. Lisa was crying, holding the sheets tightly to herself. Hatred frothed wildly through Mike's mind, tinting all things a blood red, making all things foreign to him. His gun was in his hand, and it was the one thing that seemed real. He raised it and aimed at the unreality that was Cockley rushing toward him. Something told him to shoot, to depress the stud and wait for the spilling of blood and the burning of flesh. But before he could do this thing, there was a great weight striking his shoulders. He and

Cockley were crashing into the wall, bouncing away and onto the floor. He cursed himself for delaying, for allowing the shock of seeing what he had expected to see throw him so completely off balance.

The gun was gone. He looked about for it, but nowhere could he see it. A fist smashed across his face, tore open the corner of his nose. He looked up into Cockley's face, saw eyes wide with terror and determination. He heaved himself. Cockley was too surprised to follow up his initial, instinctive attack with careful fighting. He fell off Mike, scrambled to beat the other man to his feet. But Mike was first, and he drop-kicked Cockley in the chest. Cockley rolled with the blow, however, and came up fast, clamping one hand around the wrist of the other arm to make a deadly, vicious club of his flesh. He brought it down on Mike's shoulder. The blow hurt like all hell. Mike fell, saw the old man raising his arms for a second blow.

Then Cockley froze. There was a moment of utter, tomb silence, and then the ancient's left arm went spinning madly across the room, collided with the wall and fell down. Blood showered out of Cockley's shoulder. The old man looked at it rather oddly, as if the gore-filled cave in this shoulder was not part of him, as if this was someone else's body that had been ripped open and violated. Then, almost theatrically, he swiveled slightly on his feet and fell sideways onto the carpet, his blood rippling out to form a brilliant pool about him.

Mike looked up. Lisa was standing, naked, beside the bed, the pistol clamped tightly in her hands. She looked at him, back to the corpse. "I—I had to."

He strained, stood up, rubbing his shoulder and neck. "Of course you did. He deserved it; he deserved worse." He took the gun from her hand, tucked it back into the leather pouch in his shirt sleeve.

She began to cry.

"There's no time for that," he said as gently as he could, walking to the closet. "Get dressed quickly. It is almost midnight."

She pulled a red one-piece jumper from the closet, began wriggling into it. "Cockley was supposed to leave at midnight," she said. "I hoped you'd get here in time. We better hurry. If he doesn't show up where he's supposed to, they'll come here looking for him."

That was all they needed.

He darkened the room and closed the door behind them. In the elevator, the boy asked no questions. They fell like stones, jerking to a halt just feet from the ground floor and coasting into stop position. The door opened onto the lobby—and four of Cockley's bodyguards.

"We wanted the garage!" Mike almost shouted at the boy.

"You didn't say so," the boy said, whining.

"Hey!" one of the guards shouted. "Lisa Monvasa. She's supposed to be—"

"Down!" Mike did shout this time, slamming his finger into the control panel.

The door whirred shut just seconds before the guard collided with it. Then they were dropping, jerking to another halt, tensing as the doors slid open again. There was nothing beyond the portals this time but gray concrete and floaters. "They'll have to use the stairway," he told Lisa. "We still have a few moments' head start."

He turned to the boy. "If you go back up there and bring them down, I'll kill you!" The boy was cowering in the corner, obviously wishing he had stayed home with his aura and forgotten about prestige and wealth. "Understand?" Mike roared.

"Yes, sir."

He grabbed Lisa and ran. It was supposed to be a red floater, white air system. He saw it as the bodyguards reached the bottom of the stairs and fired at them. The first shot caught the fender of the car next to theirs, shattering it like so much expensive and delicate glass.

"Here!" He pulled her to the car.

There was a man in the driver's seat, waiting. Lisa climbed in. Mike turned, fired at the guards with the gas pistol. As fast as he depressed the stud, another pellet sped away, cool and soon to grow hotter and larger. He did not wait to see if any of the first shots were successful, but seconds later he heard a mad scream and a burbling sound followed by a pause in their firing.

"Let's go!" the driver shouted. His window was down. He too was shooting.

Mike crawled the rest of the way into the vehicle, pulled the door shut behind. "Roger Nimron!"

"Observant, aren't you."

A shot struck the hood, glanced off. "Vibra-proof," Mike said to Lisa, taking her hand, squeezing it.

Another shot burst across the rear window, was gone without doing damage.

Nimron started the air system, raised the floater. Rolling up his window, he slammed a foot to the accelerator and shot out and upward, winding around the spiraled exit ramp, crossing the line that would automatically open the huge doors. But when they were only yards from the massive alloy portal, they realized it was not going to open for them. The guards had evidently turned off the power to it. It rushed them, growing, growing, growing…

Chapter Six

Charging an elephant with a slingshot. That was what he thought as the giant door loomed ahead, growing larger, and there was no hope of their stopping in time to avoid a collision. They would smash against its flank, flatten themselves, compress the floater into an irregular ball of steel and copper, aluminum and plastic—and flesh. "The vibra-beams!" Lisa shouted.

It was taking place in distorted time now, fragments of seconds almost eternities for Mike. The door swam at them, though their speed was great. He had no vibra-beam, but the gas pistol was in his hand the moment she mouthed the suggestion. He shoved his arm out of the window, fired.

Fired again and again. The door was whining like a living thing, an animal caught in a trap. Then a rent appeared in the middle. Another pellet expanded, shredded the alloy further. The third popped outward, blistering the semi-steel, peeling it back from the hole like orange skin. Then there was a bump, a thump, the shredding of the right rear fender on a jagged projection of the door, and they were through into the night, fluttering across the lawn like a manufactured butterfly.

"Why, Nimmy?" Mike asked when they were certain they were in the clear. "Why risk an important neck like yours?" He looked at Lisa. "This is the President of the United States."

"It was fun," Nimron said in way of an explanation.

"You must have a better reason than that," Mike said, shaking his head. "You could have been killed."

"Exactly," Nimron said, swerving onto a main artery and accelerating to a hundred and thirty in the high speed lane. "I could have been killed. Remember, Mike, that I said there were some things that bothered me about the past as we know it—about the pre-Show world? One was the fact that the President could have such a lavish nuclear shelter while the rest of the world and the rest of his people were dying in a fiery holocaust. Well, I think it is because, in those last years of the pre-Show world, the rulers never fought the wars they started. They did not care who died or how, because they were always safe, always too far removed from the bloodshed and the violence. They could not really conceive of the effects of a war or the plight of the masses except in a vague, very general sense. Only a few rulers in those last decades had ever fought in a war. There was one who had his ship rammed from under him, one who had been a general in battle (and it is not the generals who are the sufferers of a war, the mangled and wounded and maimed). There was a Latin American who had led his people in a revolution. Aside from those, there were no enlisted men who became rulers. I won't make that mistake. I'm going to plunge myself into the front lines of our Revolution, Mike. I'm going to make myself a part of it. In fact, I'm making that mandatory for all our leaders. Even Andrew is going to lead one of the raids tonight. It is the only way to insure a peace-loving leadership."

"It sounds reasonable."

The car swung off the road onto a more primitive highway. "You should know," Mike said, "that Cockley has a computer searching for the entrance to the Appalachian shelter. I stopped it, but I could not erase it. They'll have our location tomorrow morning—no later than tomorrow afternoon."

"If things go right," Nimron answered, "tomorrow morning will be too late for them anyway." Nevertheless, there was a mask of worry over his face, a film of anxiety.

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Death: I never thought I would see you!

The Dying: Neither did I.

Death: Shall we wrestle?

The Dying: Not just yet, please.

Death (anger seeping into his voice, anger touched by wariness): What is this thing you have said? Do you not see my claws? Is it that my fangs are not plain to you? Do not your eyes revolt at the sight of clotted blood in my transparent veins? Do you dare deny me?

The Dying: Your claws and fangs are very sharp and very clear. And, yes, I do deny you. I am not yours this time either.

Skilled mechanical hands worked over the body, worked in the body. Arteries were replaced with plastic arteries, the arm with a dead man's arm. There was new blood in the new vessels.

Somebody else's blood…

***

Mike was not blindfolded this time, and he saw the impressive entrance to the great shelter. The doors were concealed behind primary portals of artificial rock that swung out like the jaws of the mountain. They moved through the jaws and were once again in the cavernous main chamber. Technicians worked overhead, recording data, scuttling about in their three-wheeled carts, preparing for the action to come in the short hours of the night. It was two-thirty in the morning; the revolt was scheduled to begin at three o'clock.

Lisa held to his arm, tightly. He could feel her quivering. Smiling to reassure her, to make her sudden upheaval easier to take, he held her with one arm closely, as they walked.

Nimron led them to the elevators, past the guards who spoke words of cheer and encouragement and congratulations in having accomplished phase one of the plan. It struck Mike that even the lowest of those working in the complex were aware of the secret plans and able to talk conversationally to Nimron. There were no hidden plans, nothing that was not in the open for all of them to see and understand. Mike had the feeling that this was another departure from the pre-Show world. Somehow, he could not imagine a society that had participated this freely in their own government wanting to slip into the semi-death of Show and the aura.

They left the familiar hallways and entered a corridor unfamiliar to Mike. The walls were gray concrete here, nothing lavish, not even the hint of ornament. There were crates of parts and stacks of building supplies lining the walkway, narrowing it so that they had to proceed in single file in some places. "Where are we going?" he asked Nimron.

"To the studios," the other man called over his shoulder.

Lisa looked up at Mike.

He explained to her briefly, as they walked, what was going to happen. They were going to jam Show broadcasts with transmissions of their own. Only this broadcast was going to disillusion the viewer rather than give him more and better dreams. It was going to make the viewer hate himself. It was going to wreck Show, or at least throw them off balance enough so that the squads of trained fighters could wreck Show.

She trembled even more.

He held her even tighter.

They entered, at last, a large room with a giant, nearly living wall of machines that leaned slightly over a small, round stage where they would stand to overthrow the world. Mike felt a wave of power sweep through him, a river of pride. The change he would make in history tonight might be the greatest change ever. He fought down the pride and the feeling of power, remembering what Nimron had said.

A little man in a white smock rushed to Nimron's side, stood fiddling with his tiny beard, tugging his lips open as he pulled at the little peak of black whiskers. "We're almost prepared."

And Lisa said: "I'm frightened."

Chapter Seven

They found him in time, found his shattered body.

Anaxemander Cockley was swallowed by a rubber mouth and gulped into a metal stomach. He felt himself being pulled apart, shuffled together, stacked and dealt out. He felt the little forces tugging at parts of his outsides, the big forces stretching, shaping, hacking, destroying and rebuilding his insides. He felt his heart burst and felt a new one being slipped in so quickly that he had no time to faint—even if the machine had allowed him to faint.

He liked it in the Womb.

He felt his brain being touched, important points etched in it more clearly, trivia erased. Throbbing, his kidneys were replaced, his liver strengthened. Part of his stomach had been shattered by a fragment of the gas pellet. He received a new stomach.

Painlessly, his eyes were gouged out, for he had meant to have new eyes anyway. Though he was in darkness within the Womb, and though this had happened before, he was very glad indeed when the new orbs were inserted, nerved up, and he could blink eyelids over something besides empty holes.

It was time for a running through of the new facilities. A testing. The machine would see if he was all right. After all the physical things, it would run a second—and perhaps more important—test to see whether he still matched up, after all the tampering, to be the same Anaxemander Cockley, psychologically, as he had been: it would be no good to come out young if one were not the same man.

The machine stuck ice fingers into his brain, stirred around in the pudding to see if anything looked out of place, to see if any traumas needed to be erased—or replaced.

And the machine made dreams: dreams of fights wherein he rammed fingers into eyeballs, struck viciously at women as well as men, responded in all the ways he had always thought were wisest and best.

The machine checked the results and found that the new Anaxemander Cockley was exactly like the old Anaxemander Cockley except for an error of .000000023. Which could be expected, of course. It was nothing that could change him significantly, nothing that anyone else or himself would notice. He was still a deadly man.

The machine pulled out the ice fingers and began the speedheal process that would leave no scars—visible or otherwise. It must leave a perfect, flawless body, for the old man was vain.

In time, the door opened and his cot slid out. He opened his eyes; he stood.

There was a mirror which held his naked figure for inspection: eyes like nut skins, brown; a Roman nose; thin lips; white and even teeth, very carnivorous teeth; a strong chin; a lean but muscular body very virile and very agile.

He patted the Womb goodbye, dressed, and made his way to his office. His bodyguards followed silently. Everywhere else, there was commotion. The computer had been put on top speed, and clerks were manually arranging its facts to recheck it. Even a computer could be overworked.

Cockley plopped into the chair behind his desk, leaned to the grid that would carry his words to the computer. "Give me all information collected to the moment!"

There was a short, low-key humming. The card-tapes popped into the reception tray. Cockley dropped them into the player. Moments later, the crackling voice of the artificial brain sputtered out of the speaker, spewing figures and numbers, dates and places. But there was nothing of immediate value. It still had not unearthed the exact location of the Appalachian shelter, and that was the only fact anyone was interested in. He tore the cards in two, tossed them into the trash slot of his desk.

"How much more time?" he roared at one of his aides working at the collapsible desk next to his own.

"Two, maybe three hours, sir."

Cockley placed a thumb on his watch, listened to the time. Five minutes until three o'clock. They would have the bastards by sunrise. Bring them out in the sun and let them die, let them turn to dust, let their vampire, bloodsucking mouths shrivel and die. That reminded him that they had fed the audience no strong psychological material for a while. Perhaps they could bring a demented mental patient in from somewhere. He would not transmit clearly, but then he would not have to. Yes, that would be good. A bloodsucker. That would be very good. He pressed his watch. "Four until three."

"Speed that damn machine up!" he bellowed in exasperation.

***

The floater van carried exactly twenty men, counting the driver.

Pierre looked up and down the two rows of men, backs against the wall, facing each other, looking, perhaps, a bit more grim than they had a right to. After all, this would not be the first revolution ever undertaken. Perhaps, he thought, the most righteous one, but certainly not the first. It would give him a chance, though, to see

how well his training had taken hold in the minds of these men. Would they be careful to do the things he had told them to do, or would they fight like a mob of untrained ruffians in their enthusiasm? He wanted a great deal to be a success.

The word *success* associated with the word *failure* in his muddled thoughts and sent him skittering along thoughtways, back through time mists to other eras, other places. There had been a dark girl. Her name had been Rita. Rita, Rita, Rita. It was like the call of a solitary bird above white cliffs that hung over a blue sea with wind that was warm and cool at the same time. She *had* been solitary. Alone in a cafe. Rita. Sitting at a dark table, sitting with her head down, staring into a cup of coffee. And he had come in. No one was ever suave anymore, debonair or romantic. Women married less and less, for they could share the body of a Performer. They needed less and less real love, real sex. Men were the same. It died, slowly but certainly, this thing called sexual love. There were a few, however, who needed more than an aura and an artificial hour of Before, a brief fifteen minutes of During, and an hour of fondling called After. A few people needed much more. There was Pierre, and there was Rita…

The floater jolted over a bump, tossed Mailor off his seat at the end of the bench. That broke the gravity of the moment. Everyone laughed, smiled, and laughed again.

"You don't get the Valiant Heart Medal for that injury, Mailor," Nimron said.

There were Valiant Heart Medals for wounds acquired in action, Gold Stars of Valor for deaths in action. There were five awards in all, each a certificate and an impressive pin of precious metals and jewels. Pierre mused on what a fortunate thing it was that they had Roger Nimron. The medals had been his idea. To instill pride and glory into their cause, the President had said. Nimmy came up with

all sorts of things to make the people want to follow him— not least of which was his warm and friendly personality.

Slowly, the men sank into silence again and Pierre let his mind drift into memories of a bird floating over cliffs and carrying out to a vast and bottomless sea. Then to a dark girl in a cafe… then to love, mutual and fulfilling. Fulfilling—for a time. What had happened? Where had he been a failure? They had had three years of bliss. By the fifth year, she was totally bored. Had she expected too much of it? He rather suspected that was it. She had been a Romanticist, a dreamer of crystal dreams. Actual physical love was a rarity. If the birthrate was not high enough to meet Show's standards, the Government chose certain women for artificial insemination to bolster the population. Everyone submitted, for there was no willpower left in them. Had Rita expected Heaven Supreme, then, and found only Paradise? He did not know. But he would always be haunted by That Night. That Night, coming home… finding Rita. Coming home and finding Rita… finding her dead. Finding her an Empathist… Finding…

He pulled himself out of that reverie. What was it he told the men? What was it that he pounded into them during training? Before a battle, relax and think of nice things. Be warm and happy, full and tranquil. The only other thing one should think about was building a hatred for the enemy to make killing him easier. Well, he hated Show all right. He did not have to work on that. Now he must think only of nice things. Through the front windscreen, he could see the road rushing toward and under them. There was a great deal of snow falling. He would think about snow, for it was pretty, cold, soft, and white. Yes, he would think about the pale-throated snow…

***

"Three o'clock," the little man in the white smock said.

"Three o'clock," the chief technician echoed, slamming down on a switch.

Nimron was gone, off with the raiding party headed for Show studios at top speed in a superfast van floater with nineteen other men, ready to risk his life before he knew whether the jamming would work or not. Mike looked to Lisa. They held hands, sitting in chairs so close that their knees touched. There was fear etched in her face, Mike could see. It was most likely drawn all over his own face too. He laced his fingers through hers.

"You're on!" someone said.

They began broadcasting hatred for the viewer. It was not difficult. Mike found that he had always hated those faceless masses who shared his secret thoughts, his desires, his excesses. Show had trained him how to control his basest of emotions, how to keep the hatred from leaking out. Now, unchecked, it poured forth in a torrent after so many years of storage. He could see that it was the same with Lisa. There seemed, no longer, to be fear in her face so much as relief. Her features relaxed, but her teeth wedged into gritting position as she concentrated on spilling all her loathing.

Into all those minds.

Mike was enjoying it, and he could see that she was too. What must they be doing to all those leeches out there, all those mind-vampires? This time they were eating the Performer's thoughts, and they were getting indigestion.

All those minds… with all the vomit-thoughts of self-hate.

Vaguely, Mike was aware of cheering in the background. The giant board with all the lights, each representing a hundred auras, was getting darker by the moment. Thousands were tuning out, flicking off their auras. Millions were standing from their chairs,

shaking in rage. They were shutting down Show! All hell was breaking loose.

He concentrated on hating.

Then Mike was suddenly overwhelmed by a warping feeling, as if someone had taken his head in one hand, his feet in the other, and wrinkled him like old yellow paper. The room swam. He stared at Lisa, saw that she was a vague outline, a shadow person. Fade Out. They were having a Fade Out, both at the same moment. But he had never had a Fade Out and realized it. It had always been a thing cloudy and unreal, not something this immediate and terrifying. Suddenly, the room was gone.

He tried to scream, but it caught in his throat and hung there against his will. On all sides of him there was blackness, total and never-ending. A great night. Death? Before he could consider that possibility, there was a scream that punctured the blackness like a nail in a hand. And Lisa was there with him. A ghost Lisa, phantom-like.

"Mike..."

He looked down at his own hands, brought them up before his face. He could see through them. He could look directly through his hands and see Lisa. And, through her, he could see the almost material body of the night stretching to infinity, foreboding.

"Mike," she said again. She was floating a dozen feet away, hanging there, very still but for a movement of her apple lips that were on the verge of issuing sobs instead of his name.

"Lisa—"

"Where are we?"

He could see that she was on the verge of hysteria, ready to crack and spill all the fears and slimy things buried down in her id somewhere. He also was frightened—frightened, really, almost beyond endurance. Almost. But it was much better, he knew, to stifle his own fear and try to comfort her than to be trapped here with a raving madwoman— wherever "here" was. He moved his arms, as if swimming, but he could not cross the distance separating them. There was no water-against-flesh friction to propel him. The night was nothingness, not water; and his flesh did not truly seem to be flesh either. There was nothing he desired more than to be next to her and to touch her, but he could see his flailing was to no avail. He cursed silently… and was suddenly next to her. He almost screamed again, but fought it down and tried to reason this thing out. He had wished to be next to her—and here he was. It was certainly not the curse word that had propelled him, though it had seemed as if that were it for a moment there. They were not trapped in Hell, where blasphemy was a means of propulsion. If they were anywhere a religion had ever named, they were in Purgatory. And he doubted that very much, for they were alone.

"Where are we?" she asked again, more urgently this time.

"There was a Fade Out," he said, putting an arm around her. He found that he could hold her solidly, that she was very real to his touch.

"But we've had Fade Outs before. Nothing was ever like this!"

"We've crossed into some sort of… other… dimension. A nether world, a world which is a ghost of the real world. Maybe we went through this in every other Fade Out and did not remember it."

She was not trembling so terribly, but she was not yet convinced.

"Look, there were two transmitters working at once, both global models. Show's and the Revolutionaries'. The power output would

be twice as great, all mingling together, one carrying the other. Maybe this Fade Out is the first complete Fade Out ever."

"Then we're trapped here?"

"Maybe not. I wished, simply wished, to be next to you, and I was suddenly there. Teleportation of sorts, a longtime dream. Maybe we can just wish our way out of this darkness. Hold me. Wish with me. Wish to be out of this darkness and in the real world. Wish it very hard."

She clutched him.

The blackness was everywhere.

And through all things.

They wished.

This time there was terrific speed. They were bullets sailing through a wind that had sprung up from nowhere.

And there were many colors. Neon lights. Orange, green circles—five thousand concentric green circles, five million… They were trying to scream, trying to laugh. For a brief moment they heard voices all around them, moaning voices that babbled and said strange things that made little sense. Then they were past that spot and gone.

***

Alice Bello crawled over the purple squiggly and slid down into the pool of amber where the others were, where the others lay like souls in Hell. Searching, she found the man she had met earlier.

There was screaming and moaning all about her.

"Why didn't they stop and help us?" she demanded of him.

"They were Performers."

She was irritated with him. He was complacent. Instead of searching for some answer, he had given up, had set himself down in the amber pool of madness. "What has that got to do with it? They still could have helped. They went right on by. How could they go right on by like that? Why weren't they trapped like us?"

"I told you. They were Performers, not Empathists like us. We fell in toward the center, became a part of this collective mind that is all about us. But the Performers are falling from the center outward. They are going to the rim. They are expanding, not shrinking. They are using this dimension as a highway between points on their own world. They are free. That is the only way it can be."

"It can't be," she said. "We won't be trapped here forever."

"I'm afraid it is and we will be."

"But what can we do?"

"We could go insane like the rest of them." he said. And he began a strange high-pitched howl that mingled with the Others all about them, rode the crest of their mad wave.

Somehow it sounded very nice to her. Very nice indeed.

*****

After the voices, there were more lights and more darknesses for Mike and Lisa. They were plunging faster and faster. It seemed as if they were falling up, however, upward and out instead of down and in. It was not an altogether unpleasant sensation. Then, abruptly, the darkness was gone; they were both falling over a

woman in a chair, tumbling out of the dome of the aura and onto the carpet of a living room floor. Mike jumped to his feet, helped Lisa up.

The woman they had fallen over was picking herself off the floor, rubbing at her knees. She was a matronly, plump, gray-haired woman. "What the hell?" she said, turning around to look at the chair. "What the hell, what the hell?" She suddenly caught sight of them standing to the left of the chair. She opened her mouth to question, seemed to think better of it, collapsed sideways onto the chair and bounced to the floor in a dead faint instead.

"Is she dead?" Lisa asked.

"Unconscious, I think."

They turned to look at the aura. "What happened to us?" Lisa asked.

His mind was racing itself, trying to come up with some sort of answer to give her. They were back in the real world—or so it seemed—but in the wrong place on the real world. "We teleported to reality."

"What place is this?"

"I'm not quite sure."

He took her hand, and they walked from the dark living room into a dimly lighted hallway. He flicked the overhead lights on to augment the little frilly table lamp that was burning. The hall was narrowed by great stacks of things. Large, medium, and small cartons of dull brown, light blue, steel gray, and black lined the walls in one direction, lined it double the other way. Mike walked to one carton. When he was near enough, it spoke in a tiny voice: "Bubbly Popsy hits the spot. Bubbly Popsy when you're hot!" A black carton chimed in from behind him when he moved away from the soda

cartons. "Twistacheeses perfect snack; buy 'em by the case or sack! Twistacheeses perfect snack; buy—"

"What?" Lisa asked, holding to him.

"I don't know."

"Why buy all of this? She couldn't possibly use it all!"

"Bubbly Popsy… Twistacheeses perfect sna… Hope Soap for dirty spots and… Bubbly Popsy hits the…" Dozens of elfin voices began speaking to them, advertising themselves, whispering, whispering.

They moved along, counting. Ten cases of orange Bubbly Popsy. Root Beer, Lime, Cola, Grape. There were thirty-nine cartons of twenty-four bottles each; two hundred and sixteen gallons of Bubbly Popsy rested in this hallway. Among other things. One quart in one of the lower row of cartons had broken, and the sweet liquid had spilled across the carpet, soaked into it and dried in a brown circle. It had happened so long ago that the residue was no longer sticky, merely a brown powder that rose in a cloud when stepped on. Against the opposite wall were all sorts of things. Be Sure Deodorant boxes lay strewn over the floor, at least a hundred of them. There were cans of tuna. There were four hundred cans of cat food. They found, by scent, the rotting corpse of a cat lying across the unopened cans, its face stretched into a wild, horrible yawn. It seemed to have died of starvation. Its ribs were vividly outlined, its deteriorating stomach still a swollen balloon.

They went on—toward the kitchen.

The kitchen was a warehouse. Mike picked through the things, led Lisa along the narrow aisles between the stacks that towered to the ceiling. There were cases and cases of Baby Goodums Pap Food. He wondered for one horrible moment, whether they would find a baby in the same condition as the cat.

"Baby Goodums, Yum, Yum, Yum," a tiny voice sang.

"Keep refrigerated," a lower, more sedate voice throbbed continuously.

"Baby Goodums, Yum… Refrigerated… Cracker, Crackity, Crackers…"

There were great plastic skins full of cheese. Molds had eaten through the plastic where there had been small rents. Now fungus had blossomed grotesquely, yellow and black, white and blue, spreading completely over some cheeses and just beginning to contaminate other, more recent, purchases.

"What is all this?" Lisa asked.

It was seeping into his awareness, an explanation for this. This was a typical viewer's home, or Typ. V.H. as the economists at Show called them. This was a consumer's domicile. "The result," he said, "of the subliminal ads."

"But she doesn't need any of this; she isn't using it!"

"But a subliminal ad doesn't tell the viewer to buy it if he needs it. Every day there are five hours of subliminal ads. Thirty flashes per second—each flash only a few thousandths of a second long. Repeatedly, the viewer is told to buy and buy. Whether she needs it or not, she buys it."

"But this is horrible!"

"That's the economic system. State supplies the money with which the consumer plays his part by purchasing things the State has produced. This is just one viewer home. There are millions like it."

She shivered. "The cat—"

He grabbed her hand and led her through the maze of unused products. Little voices whispered to them, advised them, soft-sold them. They leaned too heavily against a column of canned fruits, sent it crashing into another column of glass containers full of heavy syrup. Glass shattered, sending syrup splattering the walls and other boxes. Syrup oozed out of the carton, spread across the floor, a quarter of an inch of it. A half inch. An inch.

"Let's get out of here," she said.

"Agreed."

They made their way through the cartons, bottles, plasti-containers to the living room. With their new perspective, they could now see that it was a room crammed with far too many couches and chairs with walls far too cluttered with art prints, many of them exactly the same. The woman was still on the floor, still unconscious but beginning to moan her way out of darkness.

"What do we do?"

Mike ran his hand over the arm of the chair. "We get into the aura and wish ourselves somewhere else."

"But now that we're out, can we use the nether world to teleport? We didn't wish ourselves there. We Faded Out and ended up in it."

"We can try. Maybe now that we've used it once, now that we've been through the other dimension—"

"Back to the Appalachian shelter?"

"We can always do that later," he said.

"Where, then?"

He pulled her into the chair with him. "To Show studios," he said. And they were gone.

Chapter Eight

The technicians in the shelter studios listened carefully to their instruments and watched—with awe—as the two ghost figures on the stage, the two, almost invisible smoke forms, continued to broadcast hate even though they seemed to have no body or brain to use. People were still turning off. The huge board was mostly dark. And the ghosts went on, hating…

Chapter Nine

The aura shimmered brightly in the corner of Andrew Cockley's office. He had just stepped from under it. His face was white as a fish belly. "Someone is jamming it!"

"The viewers are tuning out," one of the intent young men at the makeshift desk reported. "By the millions!"

A gray-haired man stepped forward from the bookshelves. "There's no telling how much mental damage this self-hate thing has done already. There will be many people, raised on self-love by Show, who will collapse under it. And those who do survive it with their minds intact will never tune into Show again. If they think the Performers really hate them so violently, they will lose confidence in us." There was no particular desperation in the man's voice, merely resignation.

"It is the Appalachian shelter that's broadcasting," one of the young men said firmly.

"Very bright," Cockley scowled. "I know what's causing it. Find that damn shelter!"

"We're trying, sir."

And they were.

***

The van moved more swiftly now. The studios were only a few blocks away. They would ram down the stage door with the reinforced front of the bus, pull inside before disembarking. Every

man in the line was wearing a seat belt. Every man in the line was afraid.

Pierre looked across the aisle at Nimron, winked. Nimron looked back, turned to the other men. "We'll teach them a few lessons tonight, boys. You are in on the making of a new world. There was a book once called *Brave New World*, but it was a bad world. Most of you are familiar with it. We are creating a Brave New World of our own. But I promise you it will be a good world. Damned good!"

Pierre admired the speech. Nimmy was good at that. Nimmy would make their mission a success.

Success and failure.

There was a thin line between those two things. He was bathed in thoughts of a girl lying in a casket. A closed casket. Then the casket was being shoved into a flaming mouth that ate it. The ashes were few. A small bottle. It was in the pocket of his fatigues right now.

"Arm straps!" the driver shouted back at them.

They grabbed for the loops of leather, slid their arms through them, hanging like so many crucified Christs against the metal wall. Pierre looked out the front window. The door was directly ahead. It appeared to be simu-wood. They veered to the left, flashed around shrubs, wobbled back to the right again. They hit the door. Wooden slabs sprayed to the left and right. The van kept moving through the lower floor of the building, crashing through racks of props and onto a broadcasting stage where technicians and two Performers were fighting to overcome the jamming.

The doors of the bus opened. They went out, guns drawn, before any of the Show people could think that a van full of armed men did not belong there. Pierre held a vibra-beam in one hand, a stunner in the other. The technicians and Performers were stunned.

Little narco-darts filled the air, biting into thighs, arms, chests, buttocks. The effect was almost instantaneous; they began dropping like flies, collapsing across machines and one another. A guard stepped around the corner of the main transmitter, fired. The shot took the face off the Revolutionary next to Pierre. Pierre fired back, had the satisfaction of seeing the other man spill intestines and undigested dinner onto the floor before he toppled forward to lie in his own mess.

After only a few moments, there was no more action, no more shooting. A half dozen corpses lay on the floor, three of their own men and three of the Show guards. Bad odds. They had to do better than man-for-man. The enemy outnumbered them to begin with. The stage, however, was secured. The unconscious bodies of technicians and Performers were scattered about, the slight rise and fall of their chests the only indication they had not been slaughtered.

"Floor by floor, according to plans," Nimmy said.

Floor by floor, upward. Sealing off all escape.

Pierre led his group of four men to their appointed sector. Their job was to clean out the left wing of the building, moving from floor to floor via the left wing elevator. On the first floor, they narco-darted more than they killed, for their victims were merely young men and women, future executives who were scurrying this way and that on errands for their respective bosses in an effort to please so that they might not be swallowed by the monster called Show but ride, instead, upon its shoulders. He hated them for Rita. But the orders were to kill only those with weapons, only the guards.

When the elevator doors hummed open at the third floor, there were two Show guards waiting to go down. Their silver and black uniforms were spotless, the silver braid over the right shoulder sparkling under the wash of the ceiling lights. Pierre fanned his vibra-beam at them before they could draw their own. One had both

his arms torn off, his chest seared and cracked. The other went spinning, round and round, losing little parts of himself—a finger, a hand, and one eye. The remains, a jigsaw man with missing pieces, crashed to the floor, wiggled a moment, and lay very still.

"Oh, my God!" one of the men gasped.

"They would have done worse to you," Pierre snapped. "They *have* done worse to many!"

They lost a man on the fourth floor.

Every fifth floor, there was a rendezvous of groups at the central elevator. Nose counts on the fifth floor showed that five had been killed. They were now an even dozen, since three had been wiped out in the initial landing. An even dozen. With twenty-five floors yet to go.

"Don't worry," Pierre said. "Those who were killed so far were the softest ones. Survival of the fittest is the law here. The rest of us are better fighters and will have a much better chance of making it. In fact, I should be surprised if we lost another man before we reach the last floor."

They all knew it was hogwash, but they all agreed.

"Okay," Nimmy said, "see you in five floors."

They moved up.

***

Mike and Lisa popped out of the aura of a monitor's console resting on a platform slightly above and to the right of the main stage. What they saw below assured them that the Revolution was going on, that Nimmy and Pierre and all the others had been here

and moved on, were, indeed, somewhere overhead fighting their way to the uppermost story.

"Down," Mike said, pointing to the ladder at the edge of the platform.

She found the rungs that led to the stage. He followed her closely, not bothering to be quiet, conscious only of the necessity for speed. From the stage, they moved into a hallway. Everywhere there were dead bodies and sleeping bodies. They moved to the right, found the center stairwell, and moved up. Nimmy's group would be working on the stairs, cleaning out the Show people and blocking passage downward.

They moved up. At the same moment, in the shelter far away, two ghosts continued to broadcast hatred while technicians hurried about or stood gaping in awe at the smoke people who did not seem to know they were smoke people!

***

Pierre had one man left.

He was desperately afraid that the invasion was going to fail. Vaguely, he was aware that there were many other buildings under attack at this very moment Hundreds of them. Everywhere there was a Show installation—guard dormitories, executive houses, training camps—there was a battle raging. And not every raiding party would win. But, somehow, it seemed essential that they win here, now, and quickly.

The guard ahead was well concealed around the sharp bend in the corridor. They had to down him, well concealed or not, before they could go on. And if they did not down him, they would fail.

***

"You're sure?"

"There is no question about it, Mr. Cockley. They are up to the twentieth floor. We have no communications with areas below that point. We cannot go down. The phones have been disconnected. Wires cut somewhere. We can't even call out of this building."

Cockley was shivering. Chills swept up his spine, throbbed across his scalp and forehead.

Somewhere, a skeleton hand with transparent veins full of clotted blood…

***

Pierre overturned the giant flower vase. He flattened himself behind it, then raised onto elbows and knees, shoved the barrel-like container. It rolled, and he shuffled after it. He had covered a third of the hall before the guard at the other end caught on. The Show man's first shot was wild, tearing a chunk from the wall, sending up a little cloud of plaster dust. Pierre returned the fire. Behind the Frenchman, the last man in the detail blistered the wall about the Show guard with beams, trying to force him to keep his head down and his gun hand still.

The vase rolled on.

The air was thick with the odor of burning lathe, charred plaster, and smoldering carpet. Blue-white smoke lay close to the floor like a heavy fog rolling in from the sea.

In time, however, the guard got enough courage to brave the covering fire, leaned around the corner and shot. Half the vase exploded in a shower of pottery fragments and dirt. Large yellow flowers fluttered to the floor, their petals shredded and burned.

Pierre continued rolling the half that was left, skittering behind it as it wobbled insanely along the corridor, bumping into walls and rebounding to weave further along. He kept firing. The guard raised, fired. The vase was gone. Fragments spun at Pierre, cut his face and hands. He ran then, dodging and weaving, toward the hiding place of the enemy.

The Show guard fired.

Fired again.

And again.

Pierre was shouting wildly. It was one of many tactics that would throw the enemy off balance. It seemed to be working. He screamed even louder, a pre-historic animal caught in tar pits.

Another shot struck toward his rear, five feet away.

The fifth shot tore off the Frenchman's foot.

He was running on the stump of his ankle. There was blood.

He turned, suddenly astounded, stared at the shoe lying back there with the foot still in it. His foot! Muscle reactions still going on in his foot, wiggling the toes.

Another shot burned past his ear, left a thunder pounding there that drowned out everything else.

He was losing! That was the only thought in his mind. He was consumed by a hot desire to kill, hotter than it had ever been.

The guard was excited too. He fired again, wild.

Then Pierre was running and shouting again. It was a strange run, a hop that now and then brought his footless leg onto the floor. He was not sure whether or not there was pain. There was lightning

that coursed through his body and flashed into his eyes, but there was not a thing that could be called pain. He rounded the corner.

The guard jumped to his feet, screaming even though he had not been wounded.

Pierre fired, tore the man's side out.

They stood screaming at each other, two savages in a death trance ritual. Time seemed to have been halted in its tracks, stuck on the apex of their scream for all eternity. They were transformed into two toy soldiers with real-looking wounds, screaming death at each other. Their screams mingled, blended, became one scream that vibrated between their two sets of lips in an almost visible arc.

The tableau was broken by the guard firing recklessly as he began to wobble. One beam vibrated through Pierre's chest, shredded a few things there. Blood foamed out of his mouth, spattered across the guard's face. Only seconds were passing, Pierre realized. He had slipped into the slow-motion, third person viewpoint that he taught his students. Or was there more to it than that, something darker and more dreadful? Was this Death? Were the last few moments of life an eternity of horror and ugliness?

Another shot tore open his kneecap, spilling blood and yellow fluid.

Pierre brought his gun up, fired. All of it was very slow and terribly agonizing. He could just about see the waves of the beam. The man's face disappeared in a spray of unmentionable things. The teeth chattered inanely for a moment in the raw flesh of his face, then clicked shut like a bear trap's jaws. A black tongue thrust its way between them, lolled from the corner of the mouth. The guard fell forward.

Pierre felt himself falling too. He struck the carpet softly, lay staring at the wall which seemed to tide like water, rushing at him

and then receding. The grain of the simu-wood was like the waves of an ocean pouring upon the beach of the carpet The strands of the carpet were very suddenly snakes wiggling and writhing about him. It was like a psychedelic illusion, colorful and unreal. He was distantly aware of his last man checking him, taking his weapon and departing to let him die. They were going on with the battle. Nothing was going to stop them, least of all his death. It would be a success. He was conscious of dark, dream hair and wine lips and scented breath. Then he was enclosed once more between her large, smooth breasts, enclosed in the darkness there. In the warm, inviting darkness…

***

Mike and Lisa rounded the corner, searching for the babble of voices that had attracted them from the stairs. And they found the source. Nimmy and eight other men were gathered before the central elevator shaft, talking animatedly, waving arms and shaking heads.

"Nimmy!" he called out.

The men turned almost in unison, bringing up their weapons. There was a general insucking of breath and a clicking of triggers as they prepared to fire.

"No!" he shouted, throwing up an arm to ward off a beam if it came, a futile but instinctive action.

"Mike? Lisa? What the hell is this all about?" Nimron was hurrying toward them. "You're supposed to be at the studios."

Mike explained, briefly, the developments of the last minutes, the beginning of the broadcasts, the Fade Out, the journey through the other world to the old woman's house, the teleportation here.

"But how—?"

"That's something your own physicists or whatever are going to have to figure out. I haven't the faintest idea."

Nimron thought a moment, wrinkled his brow, bringing his eyebrows together in a dark line "Do you mind taking a few more risks?"

"We came to help."

"The next floor is the last, Cockley's floor. If you could take vibra-pistols behind their barricades, teleport to their rear—"

"We can."

Nimron smiled, ordered two of the guards to hand over their pistols, leaving them with stunners only. "Good luck," he said to Mike.

"We have to find an aura—a departure point," Mike said.

They searched the rooms, stepping over sleeping executives and gore-covered guards, opening every door and peeking around every corner. They finally found a lounge with three chairs. They flipped one on. Both of them squeezed into the multicolored haze that was the aura. They made their wishes.

One moment, there was light…

One moment, darkness…

And a swirling of all imaginable colors, blending into one another, separating into weird shapes that pulsated and flowed.

Ocher, lapis lazuli, crimson, maroon…

An infinity of golden squares, concentric, popped up before them and was swimming all about them as they plunged down the very center toward a pinpoint of shimmering sunlight.

One moment, there were voices that moaned and screamed.

Then darkness and no voices…

Then light and a room…

Cockley's office. Mike moved quickly from the chair to stand upon the familiar carpet. There were two men working at a table, a guard by the door, and Cockley at his desk. No one had noticed them, as the chair rested in a shaded corner.

Lisa was at his side.

Mike raised his pistol, smashed the guard up against the wall and held the beam on him until the spattering of blood and flesh grew great. One of the young men at the table went for something to throw. Mike swiveled, ruptured both the boys' stomachs. Lisa choked.

Then there was only Cockley, sitting at his desk with his mouth hanging open and his eyes more than a bit wide. "Malone—"

"No. Not Malone."

"Mike. Mike Jorgova. Plastic surgery. You should have checked my fingerprints against those in your files, Cockley."

The man looked very old now. The air of youth had dissipated; the air of self-assurance had gone stale. His eyes were filled with the horrors and weariness of decades —too many decades. His chin was quivering. Mike was suddenly able to understand why Cockley was cowering instead of leaping and attempting to kill him. Now there was no chance that the old man would be given to his metal

surgeons and repaired. If he was killed this time, there would be no coming back from the dead. This would be final and everlasting. And Cockley was afraid.

Mike dropped the gun, kicked it behind for Lisa to pick up. He began practicing what he had been taught. He began to allow his hatred to bubble upward. He pictured Cockley not as the sniveling thing he was now, but as the arrogant and ruthless man he had once been. "I'm going to kill you," he said quite evenly.

Cockley stood, swayed from side to side. His flesh was the color of a dead gull lying in the backwash of the sea.

"I'm going to shred you into pieces and toss you down the incinerator shaft where all garbage goes," Mike continued.

"Stay away!" Cockley said gruffly, gritting his teeth.

Mike smiled. "That won't work. You can't fool me this time. You're scared stiff. If you weren't—if you had been self-assured like the old Anaxemander Cockley—you would have jumped that desk and beaten me to a pulp. But you have no courage left. If you get killed this time, there will be no new organs for you. You won't be able to continue living off other people's bodies. Your vampire days are over. And that scares you."

Cockley fumbled in a desk drawer, came out with a hand weapon.

Mike brought up a foot, twisted sideways, connected with the pistol and sent it clattering across the room to lie in a corner, a useless toy.

"Stay away!"

He leaped, brought Cockley to the floor. Putting all of his force behind the blow, the old man struck upward with his fist, aiming for

his opponent's nose. Mike was able to fend off the blow without any real difficulty. He brought back his own fist, smashed it across Cockley's jaw. Blood trickled out of the wrinkled corner of the mouth, seeping like brown sewer water. Then the hand with the metal plate came up. And down. Up, down, up, down, updown. Something snapped in Cockley's neck. He went limp, a rag man now. His eyes rolled up and his tongue out. There was stillness and quiet in him. Mike's hatred went limp too. There was nothing in him now but disgust, disgust for all that Show stood for and for all it had done. In the end, it had fallen easily when struck at the heart. It had taken only a few men who were not satisfied. Show's power, unlike that of any previous government, had not lain in the citizens' willingness to defend it but in the unwillingness of the people to fight against it. It was a subtle but important difference. It was that thin line of difference that had toppled the entire thing.

He lifted the body, shoved it through the trash disposal slot and waited until he heard it strike the grating below.

There was the hissing sound of juices spluttering under the lick of the hot tongues.

When he was very sure that the body was beyond reconstitution, he put his arm around Lisa's waist, punched the button that would override the block on the elevators that kept them from reaching this final floor. There was the sound of fighting outside, gradually diminishing to a scuffling noise and heavy breathing. They opened the door to the hallway, stepped out.

Victory was theirs.

Chapter Ten

Hi again! Me, Society. That is what I'll soon be called instead of Zombie. In a way, it will be a blessing. You see, all it took in this Household world Show had created was one dissident member. The closer a society, the more possible damage one man can do if he tries. In a way, I'll be glad to be Society again. But, oh, those goddamn birth pains!

Chapter Eleven

"And so," Mike was saying to Nimron, "evidently the hundred percent experience tubes were just a little too effective. More and more people started going Empathist more quickly. Sometimes within minutes. And Fetters, the psychiatrist, thinks the voices we hear as we travel through the nether world are not voices at all but the thoughts of those viewers who went Empathist and are trapped in there forever. Fetters says it is a rebirth of God, more or less. A returning to the collective mind. It seems a hellishly ineffective god, however."

"Hasn't He always been hellishly ineffective?" Nimron asked.

"Perhaps."

Nimron changed positions in the soft, velveteen-covered seat. "But why didn't you and Lisa lose your minds when you entered this nether world?"

"The report from your doctors and physicists will explain it better than I can. We have only theory to go on. The Empathist, we believe, is funneling inward, thousands upon thousands of them occupying the same portion of this other dimension, this thought world. In a Fade Out, however, the Performer is flashing outward toward an aura, not inward from an aura."

"And the ghost bodies you left behind?"

"Merely a thought configuration, our minds carrying on in a tape loop sort of way while our physical selves are gone. It is sustained by the energy web of the cone that picks up the thoughts and broadcasts them."

"It's difficult to buy all of this."

"But it is a start. Maybe we will find it's all something else," Mike said enthusiastically. "But we have theories to prove or disprove, a place to begin. And we have teleportation. Once forced into the other dimension by the power buildup, your body's electrical pattern is altered so that you need only an aura to step from place to place. Who knows, we may find out that repeated use of the dimension enables us to pop in and out of it without even the aid of an aura."

"The thought of teleportation makes me shiver," Nimron said, shivering to prove his point. "It can't be developed and released for some time—for one helluva long time. We have to rebuild the world before we can revolutionize it again."

"All of you shut up," a voice said behind them. Andrew Flaxen leaned over their shoulders. "If you are quiet, we can begin the evening's entertainment."

"If you set the machine up," Nimron said, "then we'll have to wait for someone to come and fix it anyhow."

"You're just jealous because you aren't mechanically inclined. Now, eyes straight ahead."

He went back to the machine; he darkened the room.

Ahead of them, there were lights and there were people.

Twentieth Century Fox, giant letters proclaimed in golden splendor.

There was music and colors.

They all gasped. They were all fascinated, all of them in that little shelter room in the belly of the mountain which had given birth to a new world.

The scene changed. They gasped again.

Mike thought how different it was from Show—this thing called the Motion Picture. You could not really tell what the Performer was thinking. It was a challenge to understand him, to figure him out from his facial expressions and his surface conversation. You could not get close to him at all.

And that was nice. There had been so much of being close. It was wonderful to be distant from everyone. Almost everyone. In the darkness, he raised an arm, drew her to him. Together they *ohhed* and they *ahhed*.

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